F.E.A.R. RETURNS AS PROJECT ORIGIN
MASSIVE! 9 PAGES OF SCREENS, INTERVIEWS, AND EXCLUSIVE INFO

BIOSHOCK
10 OUT OF 10!
PAGE 62

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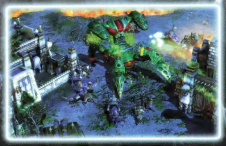

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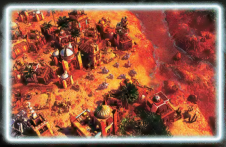

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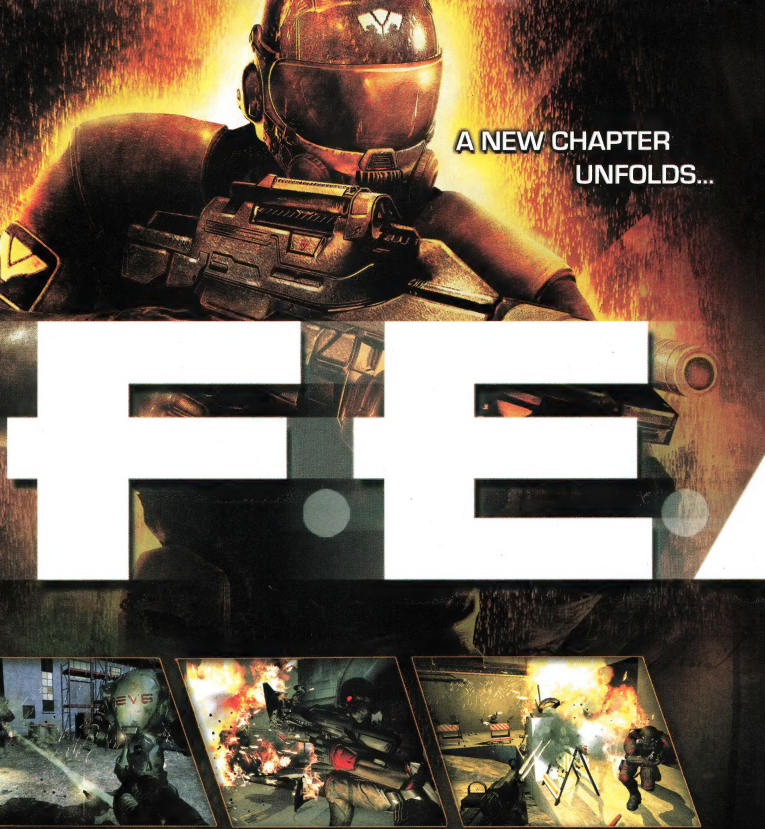

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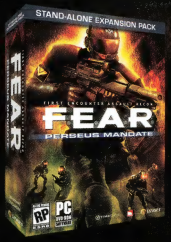

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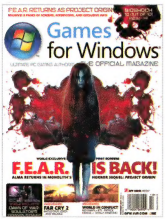

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GODS & HEROES

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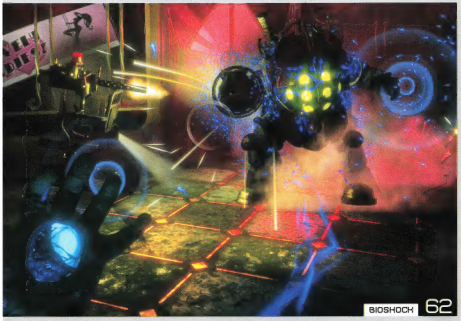

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THIS MONTH ON GFW11.1UP.COM

Get ready for more bloody, cool *Project Origin* info and screens. Plus: RTS fans can check out some of the new units and buildings in *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Soulstorm*.

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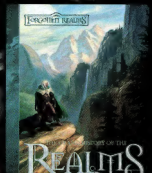

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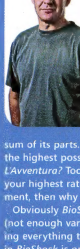
THE BIG DADDY OF 2007

***BioShock* may not be perfect...but it's a 10**



***BioShock* is one** of those games that show up once or twice a year, at most, that always provoke the same question amongst the brain trust here at *GFW* headquarters: "If this isn't a 10, what is?" Managing editor Sean Molloy, who reviews the game on pg. 62, felt instinctively upon completing it that this was a 10, and then only questioned himself, in discussing it with the rest of us as we put this issue together, because a 10 is such a serious statement to make. We don't hand them out lightly.

A 10 is also subject to serious misinterpretation. In particular, many people seem to believe that when we award one we are saying that a game is perfect. This, of course, is nonsense, because there is no such thing as a perfect game. There are always going to be flaws. What it's really about, like any great work of art, is being more than the sum of its parts. Take any acknowledged classic of world cinema—a movie that has garnered the highest possible rating—and you will find flaws there, too. *Citizen Kane*? Too gimmicky. *L'Avventura*? Too slow. *Roller Boogie*? Too much roller boogying. If you are going to withhold your highest rating from something that is so clearly an awesome, one-of-a-kind achievement, then why bother having that highest rating? What are you holding out for exactly?

Obviously *BioShock* is not perfect. If you want, you can pick on any number of annoyances (not enough variety in enemies, too much backtracking through levels, Vita Chambers making everything too easy), but to do so is to lose sight of the big picture here. What we have in *BioShock* is one of the most singularly original and compelling game worlds we've seen in years, one that doesn't feed off the same three cliches everyone else uses, one that both delights and challenges the player around each new corner.

Since this magazine will be on newsstands weeks after the game's release, you will no doubt be hearing the inevitable backlash from naysayers and cynics and haters and those who can't deal with anything popular. Don't listen to them. *BioShock* is that rare phenomenon in the gaming world: it is an event. So go play it, goddang it. Well, after you read this magazine, that is.

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *BioShock, Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Dark Crusade, Guild Wars: Nightfall*
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

Sean is still searching for an objectivist puzzle game that doesn't misrepresent the axiom of conciousness as an aggregate lump of multicolored gems.

Now Playing: *BioShock, Medieval II: Total War—Kingdoms, WOW*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

Darren is still searching for a way to keep the HP Blackbird 002 without getting arrested.

Now Playing: *World in Conflict, realSpyder: London, BioShock*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)

Ryan is still searching for an interceptor that can withstand a sudden charge of 50,000 volts.

Now Playing: *Guild Wars: Eye of the North*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (START)

Shawn is still searching for super-soldier nanomachines and an adamantium shield in *Medal of Honor: Airborne*.

Now Playing: *BioShock, Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

Michael is still searching for the rest of his Subaru somewhere along the Arai Japanese Alpine Rally in *DiRT*.

Now Playing: *BioShock, DiRT*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

Rose is still searching for a coworker without Old Spice halitosis.

Now Playing: *The Great Flying Mintini (www.jibjab.com)*
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Letters

Amongst this month's top letters: F and U

LETTER OF THE MONTH

UHHHH...WHAT?

Lets say your driving along, in your new Mustang. You park in the parking lot of your favorite restaurant. Go in, get your favorite dish. After a tasty meal, AND...DUHN DUHN. YOUR S***ing car is gone. You call the cops (Or as ya is I like to call them.) they find the guy who stole your car. Then the po po arrests you, and the theif. How if you think thats stupid, thats the SAME logic EA uses for CD CD.

If someone DC's (Disconnects)...not only does he get a DC on his record. But you do too! I need you guys to help me understand this logic PLEASE. Now im sure ANYTHING against EA is like a no no because EA is prolly like the Mafia so you guys they might try to buy out your magazine, or something. Kinda like poor old Westwood, who got bought out by EA.

PS. THANX FOR THIS GFW MAGAZINE YOU GUYS ROXORZ. ECPECIALY JEFF GREEN ! ! !

drunkalien6 (Tyler)

You're welcome?

CGW = GFW

I must admit that I was quite apprehensive when I subscribed to your magazine two months ago. I was still recovering from the loss of the now-defunct *Computer Games Magazine*; I figured no other publication could hold a candle to it, but I figured I'd give you guys a chance, even with your "official" logo. It didn't take me too long to realize you guys were the real thing—not trite, juvenile, and immature like other magazines of this kind. I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of writing, the interesting and novel articles, and the podcasts. Keep up the good work!

Tom Neri

Thanks for the kind comments. When we first relaunched the magazine as *GFW*, we were ready for a flood of hate—but we're very happy that readers like you realize that, behind the big, shiny "Official Magazine" banner, we're still makin' the same magazine.

WOW'D OUT

Seriously—you have to stop making *World of WarCraft* the lead story every other month. I'm not going to cancel my subscription, but this is getting ridiculous. I don't play *WOW*, I don't care about *WOW*, and I'm not the only one reading your mag who thinks this.

Paul M. Dziejman

You guys really put too much *World of WarCraft* in your magazine. Come on—it's a PC game that you have to pay for monthly. Why do you think you should have to buy it first...then pay for it monthly?

Chris C.

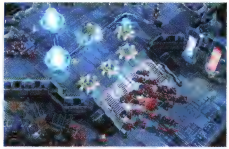
• **Just how much *WOW* is too much *WOW*?**

We understand *WOW* burnout or exhaustion. Even active *WOW* dislike. However, we are talking about one of the biggest PC games of all time. When we have the opportunity to cover something new on a game that over 9 million people are playing, we're absolutely going to take it.

STARCRAFT II SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS?

I've been a *StarCraft* addict for about five years, and I would do just about anything to get my hands on a demo of *StarCraft II*. However, I play games on my laptop. It isn't a state-of-the-art, $6,000, gold-encrusted machine...but it's sufficient. I can play games like *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Dark Crusade*. However, I was wondering what *StarCraft II*'s system requirements will be. Do you guys have any guesses?

Zac Brooks



• **Requires 18.5GHz CPU, 1TB RAM, 2GB videocard.**

Obviously, we have no way of knowing at this point, but—considering Blizzard's reputation for making its games available to the widest possible audience—we imagine it's gonna be compatible with a majority of PCs.

THAT DIRTY WORD AGAIN...

I just read your review of *DiRT* (*GFW* #10, pg. 74). I bought the game and love it, and I agree with your review. However...one thing you should have mentioned: that evil StarForce copy protection. I've read all the horror stories about StarForce, and I chose to avoid having one of my own—so I cracked *DiRT* (a game I legitimately bought) just to avoid this mess. *DiRT* was the first game I bought that included StarForce, and it will be the last. If I [had known] about this ahead of time, I wouldn't have bought *DiRT*.

Michael Pittenger

We agree, Michael: StarForce sucks.

Got mail? Drop it at GFWLetters@ziffdavis.com. •

MAIL BYTES

If editor-in-chief Jeff Green were smart, he would get Jessica Alba, dress her up as a *World of WarCraft* character, and put her on the cover. I bet you guys would sell a couple zillion copies.

Computer Dave

On your "This Old PC" shopping list (*GFW* #10, pg. 96), don't you think $113 is kinda pricey for 2MB of RAM? I mean, it is Corsair, but still...oops?

Charles Best, Jr.

Could you please substitute Freddy Krueger's picture for casual games columnist Robert Coffey's? It will scare me less.

Clifford Bowden

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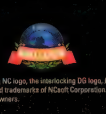

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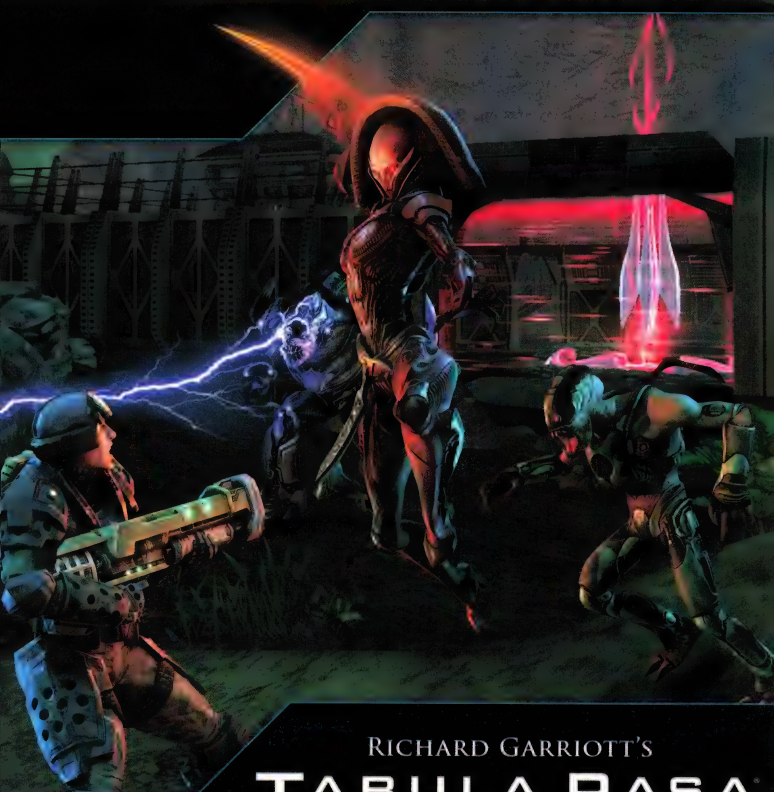

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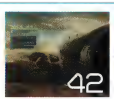

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SOULSTORM

Back to the future again in *Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War*'s third expansion

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Relic Entertainment/Iron Lore** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2008**

Meet the Dark Eldar. They're not happy to see you. Except to kill you and steal your soul.

As we venture inside Iron, Dark Eldar mercs and Eldar wreck their own brand of havoc.

EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

As with some real-world conflicts, it seems like the war in *Warhammer 40,000* is never going to end. In the game universe itself, the combatants have been fighting for thousands of years. In Games Workshop's original tabletop game, gamers have been obsessively painting their metal figurines and battling it out at game stores and conventions and basements for 20 years now. And now, PC gamers are about to enter the fray again with *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Soulstorm*, the third expansion in as many years to Relic Entertainment's outstanding real-time strategy game.

If your reaction to this news is: "Ehhhh, another expansion?" we hear you. This was our first reaction, too. With rare exceptions, multiple expansions usually result in diluting a game's original charm and strength, or at least an exhaustion on the part of many gamers (Hi, *Sims 2*!), leaving only the diehard fans clinging on. But Relic warrants a more generous attitude, because *Dawn of War* has gotten progressively *better* with each of its previous two expansions. While 2005's *Winter Assault* expansion was decent, offering two new campaigns and a new race (the Imperial Guard), last year's *Dark Crusade* was epic, with not only two more new races (the Tau and Necron), but also a brand-new *Total War*–style metagame, which let you carry out your planetary conquest with any of the game's races in any way you saw fit. Best of all, Relic released the game as a "stand-alone expansion," meaning that it ran without the original game, thus enticing a whole new set of players.

Now Relic is announcing *Dawn of War: Soulstorm*, another stand-alone expansion, and its ambition for the series continues apace. Codeveloped this time with Iron Lore—the folks behind last year's awesome *Titan Quest*—*Soulstorm* offers two more new races (bringing the grand total up to nine), all-new air units, and a greatly expanded metagame.

STAR CONTROL

"We really liked how the metagame came out in *Dark Crusade*," says Relic executive producer Jonathan Dowdeswell, "as did the fans, so we decided to take it one step further this time." That one step was hinted at in the teaser at the end of *Dark Crusade*, with the camera zooming out from a single planet to encompass an entire star system.

So that is the new playing field in *Soulstorm*: A star system called Kauvara, consisting of four planets and three moons spread out over 31 territories, in which gamers will now do battle. Just the same thing but bigger? "The play is inherently similar," admits Dowdeswell, "mostly revolving around strategic choices of which planet and provinces to attack. But the addition of planets does give us more interesting ways to limit how gamers can access certain areas and move around. In addition, it really helps bring out the sci-fi nature of the universe. Now you have these space-based elements that make you go, 'OK, cool, right on'—these are space-faring races, which of course has always been true, but now it's woven into the game."

The story, in a nutshell, is this: As the game opens, the outer edge of Kauvara has been beset by a warp storm, a phenomenon in Games Workshop's universe that acts to cut off one region of space from another, making faster-than-light travel impossible. This warp storm has attracted *Dawn of War*'s nine races, who have all shown up to investigate >

Dark Eldar Warp Beasts attack a Raptors tank. According to Games Workshop's lore, the Warp Beast is the "living embodiment of death and pain" and a "voracious predator." We tremble.

Two Orks take on a Dark Eldar Raider, a fast, light, tank-like transport vehicle that allows troops on board to fight while zooming across the battlefield.

> "WE THINK THE RACES ARE GETTING BETTER WITH EACH EXPANSION."
> —JONATHAN DOWDESWELL, RELIC ENTERTAINMENT

and/or profit by this turn of events. "When they all arrive," says Dowdeswell, "they realize that everyone else is here, that it's a bigger party than they expected—and there are some big reveals late in the story that puts the significance of the place into greater context."

SOUL-SUCKING JERKS

Of course, as even dedicated fans will admit, this is all just background noise for what really matters in *Warhammer 40K*: rampant bloodletting. Joining the slaughter this time are two more races—the Dark Eldar and a yet-to-be named second race. The Dark Eldar are the (duh) darker, eviler version of the elf-like Eldar—aggressive "pirate raiders," according to Dowdeswell. Most crucially, they have the unique ability to consume souls. When infantry units die, they leave behind a purple mist called "soul essence" that only Dark Eldar players can see and then harvest as a third resource, which they can then use to purchase powerful global abilities called soul powers.

If that seems like a huge, unfair advantage for the new race—a whole new resource that only *they* get—Dowdeswell assures us that they are painfully aware of all the balancing issues involved. "Every time we start a new race," he says, "we think, OK, how are we gonna make this race distinct in a way that is cool, that people are gonna want to play—at the same time not unbalancing the rest of the game."

When we snarkily ask why any game actually needs nine races, and whether they worry about the game breaking down under all that weight or flattening out with indistinct choices, Dowdeswell argues the opposite. "Actually, we think the races are getting better in their intended roles with each new expansion. The initial characteristics of a race, the initial philosophy behind it, gets more exaggerated as we go further in. The Imperial Guard, for example, got better at their 'turtling' role in *Dark Crusade*, and they'll get better again in *Soulstorm*."

Even within one race, overlap and flatness can be a tough challenge. "It's a really interesting and difficult part of game development," says Dowdeswell. "We keep adding new units to the races, but when we do that, old units can lose some of their unique personality and role on the battlefield. That's our challenge: to keep all the units competitive and interesting. Sometimes it means we take half of a unit's purpose away or remove it from the game entirely."

Further complicating the balance issues is the addition, for the first time, of air units. Every race is getting them in *Soulstorm* except for the Necron, who (being underground for 60 million years) simply did not have the lore to support it in Games Workshop's elaborate storyline. Air units won't be affected by terrain, obviously, and therefore can go anywhere on the map. They won't be squad based, nor will they be able to capture control points—but they will be able to destroy structures built on them. >

THEY KICKED ME IN THE TEETH,
TORE MY GIRLFRIEND IN HALF
AND TOOK AWAY THE SUN.
I'M GOING TO LONDON.

The Dark Eldar are the "pirate raiders" of the *Warhammer 40K* universe, causing death and destruction wherever they go. Unlike, say, all the other tree-hugging peaceniks in the game.

The Dark Eldar attack a Space Marine base. "We've tried to make them really great at surprise attacks," says Relic's Jonathan Dowdeswell. "Coming in with a big force, doing tons of damage, and getting out fast."

"Obviously, this is a significant change to the game," says Dowdeswell. "But again, this allows us to give existing units greater specialization. Units that were starting to encroach on each other in terms of intent now can be tweaked to be strong or weak against air units." Air combat is also going to have a huge impact on old multiplayer maps, which were largely balanced by terrain. "Yeah," laughs Dowdeswell, "people are gonna go back to some of the original maps they really loved, and things will be very different now."

Speaking of multiplayer, Relic is introducing a *Battlefield 2*–style reward system for online play. The new system will award medals for a variety of achievements—such as winning 10 ranked games in a row, or winning a ranked game with a 5-to-1 kill ratio. "These are bragging rights," says Dowdeswell, "for players who've committed a lot of time to show off and be recognized."

GOT MILK?

So what of our "Ehhhh, another expansion" reaction? Dowdeswell responds: "Look, we think about this all the time. We're gamers. I have three systems at home, and as long as what I'm being offered, or what I'm offering, is an interesting new play experience, I'm good. If the approach is 'OK let's stamp out another one and stick it in a box,' then I think, of course, there's no reason for people to stay with it.

"But I can trace the real answer to your question back to the very first prototype we did on *Dawn of War*. We were three months in, we were building on the *Impossible Creatures* engine, and we had a few key gameplay concepts: squad control, reinforcing on-the-fly, distributed resource points. And in three months we had this incredibly fun little game that THQ's QA department had to ban from its computers because it was all they were playing. It's as simple as that. And every time we add new features, new armies, it ends up *more* fun. Gameplay is difficult, right? When you have something that works, it's kinda nice to stick with it. People talk about the graphical arms race, and we're definitely part of it with *Company of Heroes*. But there's an equal joy and benefit in setting a standard with gameplay. If we have something fun and people like it, why would we stop? Why should we?" **Jeff Green**

WHY STAND-ALONE EXPANSION?

As in *Dark Crusade*, your online play in *Soulstorm* is restricted by what you own. If all you own is this expansion, you can only play online using the two new races. (In single-player, you have access to all nine.) Owning the original *Dawn of War* or either of the previous expansions gives you access to those races found in each. The idea is to reward legacy players and to entice new players to try the franchise without the barrier of needing to own the original game. "Our big concern now as game developers, particularly as you look at the trend with social network sites, is to build a community of people that like to be involved, and have as little barrier to getting in as possible," says Relic's Jonathan Dowdeswell. "Forcing people to go out and find the old game feels like it splinters us. *Winter Assault* was a 'classic expansion,' and the benefit to us was that there were less discs to ship and it drove sales of the original, which is great. But now we're more concerned with just getting people playing."

XTRAS

For more on *Soulstorm*, visit GFWLIVE.com, where you'll find a closer look at some of the new Dark Eldar units and buildings.

GFWLIVE.COM

HallgrateLondon.com
They impaled my dog
and drenched everything in blood.
It's time to return some pain.
I'm going to LONDON.

According to IMC/Metropolis head of communication Ingo Horn, "*They* are very dangerous and cool-looking—with tentacles, claws, et cetera!"

THEY

Sci-fi shooter reinvents the genre with aliens...and robots

PUBLISHER: **TBA** DEVELOPER: **IMC/Metropolis** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

PREVIEW

Why pay for plane tickets when you can experience all the awkward humiliation of international travel from the comfort of your e-mail inbox? Take, for example, this message from Ingo Horn, head of communication for Cologne, Germany-based game developer IMC/Metropolis: "It would be *very* nice if you could forward me a nice quote from your article as soon as you could give it out so we might be able to use it for our website/trailer/marketing assets—you know how it works."

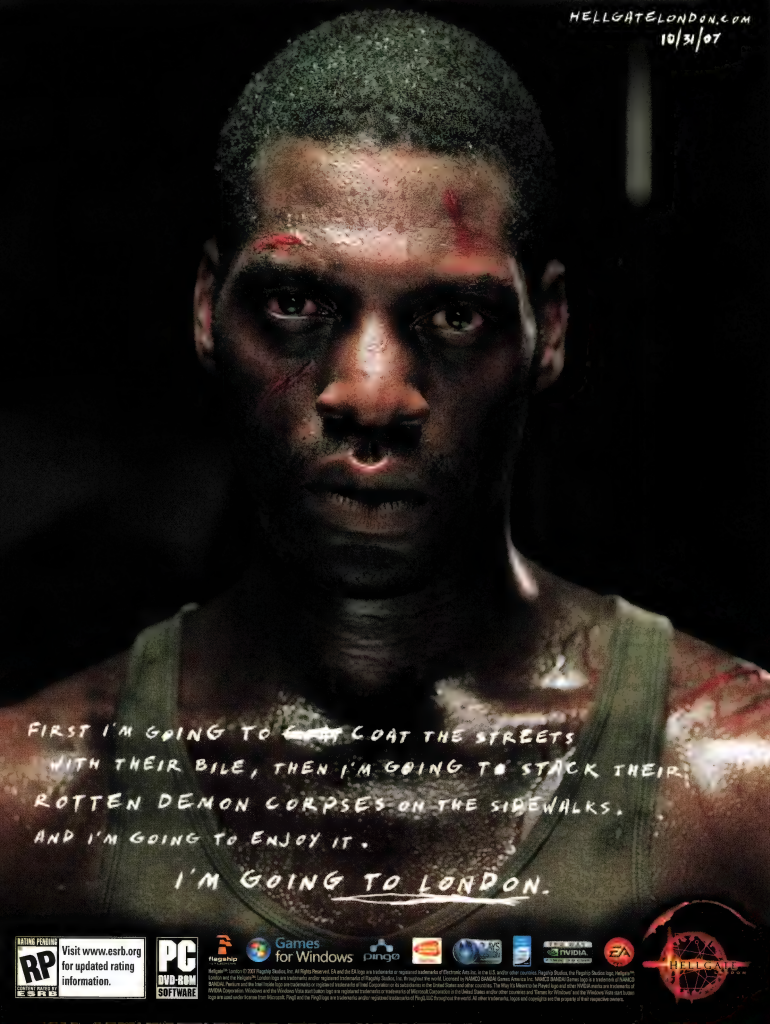
Yes, I know how it works. Step 1: You deposit $3,000 in my numbered Swiss bank account. Step 2: I write something slobbery and over-the-top for you to quote in your marketing materials. So far, I'm not showing any new deposits, but I'll give it a shot anyway: The creators of the sci-fi first-person shooter *They* are so cocksure about their game they're either working on the next big thing or struggling against the language barrier to properly express themselves. Since the screens they've provided look an awful lot like the last big thing—*Half-Life 2*—I'm going to guess that it's a case of the latter.

"But *They* is not only a sci-fi shooter," says Horn. "It's a next-gen mystery FPS, so *They* will be different." *They* certainly is a mystery. Set in the near future, you play the role of an unnamed British soldier battling a siege of robots. But wait—there's a twist: The robots are just tools of an alien invasion. "*They* tries to get away from the standard, boring storylines of shooters, which normally could be ignored," he adds. As for how a game about alien-controlled robots will avoid "standard, boring" sci-fi storytelling tropes, Horn is fuzzy.

"We added not only a dense storyline to our vision of a great game, but also amazing mystery events and stunning twists and turns," says Horn. "So fans of *Lost*, *Heroes*, and similar series will surely be extremely interested in *They*." While Horn is committed to vague platitudes on the story front, he seems more willing to talk about the feature he'd like to promote: *They*'s weapon system. Instead of switching between the usual cast of ballistic characters—shotguns, machine guns, rifles, and rocket launchers—*They* has a single heavily modifiable gun.

"In *They* you will have one weapon you identify yourself with," he says. "You will have a basic weapon with four upgrade slots, which can be individualized on demand." The game will feature "hundreds of updates, modules, upgrades, and stuff" with which to modify your piece, and you can store your favorite contraptions on the usual numbered hotkeys. Horn emphasizes a kind of pet relationship with the weapon: "It is your baby and your best friend."

Shooters are such a broad category at this point that genre alone does little to describe an experience. "If you like to compare," he says, "it is best to think about the scripting and atmosphere of *F.E.A.R.* transferred into another story and moved from horror to mystery." But does the world really need another sci-fi shooter? "Of course, sci-fi scenarios are very common, but on the other hand these are successful," says Horn. "Why should any team invent the wheel in a new way if the current one is still up and running?" How very ambitious! (And feel free to use that for your marketing assets.) **Robert Ashley**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10/31/07
FIRST I'M GOING TO COAT THE STREETS
WITH THEIR BILE, THEN I'M GOING TO STACK THEIR
ROTTEN DEMON CORPSES ON THE SIDEWALKS.
AND I'M GOING TO ENJOY IT.
I'M GOING TO LONDON.

RATING PENDING
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THE USUAL SUS

TRENDS

***"There seems to be** a widely held belief that democracy demands leaving regulation...to the individual. Leaving everything to the individual is actually* not *democracy; it is anarchy. And it is a pity that children should suffer from the anarchist trends in our society."* —Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*

We Americans are suckers for dire threats, especially to our children. We love them, crave them, make them up out of thin air when no boogeyman suitably vague and terrifying can be found.

Popular entertainment has always been a fruitful source for panics and scares: the dime novel, the waltz, Elvis' beckoning hips. But moral crusaders really struck gold with the mass-media revolution; once film, comic books, rock music—and, of course, videogames—hit the scene, parents and paranoids alike found easy targets for their unfounded neuroses.

The story of censorship and the media is a movie on constant replay, a song stuck in an endless loop—a disc skipping, a frame freezing. If those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it, then we're a nation of amnesiacs, always anxious to embrace the next new media terror.

"The more history you read about popular entertainment, you'll always find those people who have the inclination to be shocked," says Patrick Loughney, curator of the Motion Picture Department at the George Eastman House International Museum of Film and Photography. "Videogames are just the latest iteration. If you think this is new, or unusual, or videogames are being singled out in any way, you're completely, utterly wrong."

Here we examine three major censorship battles whose outcomes mirror the gaming industry's current woes, as history, once again, repeats itself.

MOVIES

Movies exploded onto the American pop-culture scene in the late 1890s. Post-Victorian hipsters flocked to the theaters by the millions, and by the late 1910s, America had become the largest movie market in the world.

Many early films were surprisingly salacious, featuring drug use, homosexuality, brutal violence, even stripteases. Naturally, this sparked concern among religious groups and child-welfare activists. "Movies were amazingly powerful; they dominated culture," says Loughney. "People looked at this phenomenon and wondered, 'Is this the beginning of the end for America?'"

Particularly frightening was this new medium's pervasiveness. Before film, concerned citizens could easily perform weekly immorality inspections of a city's entertainment venues (like vaudeville and burlesque houses). But by 1912, there were more than 800 movie theaters in New York City alone. "Because of the technology, the job just got too big," says Loughney. "Just like what happened 100 years later with videogames. It's really the same thing."

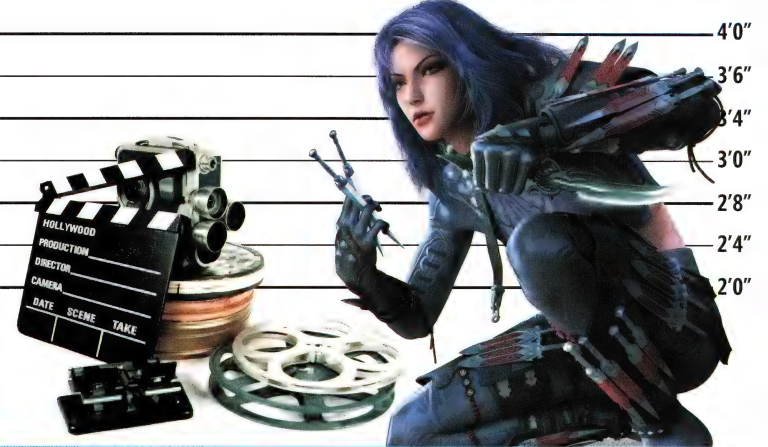
Moral reformers' only recourse was to appeal to higher authorities. "If you went to the city council or the mayor," says Loughney, "you could control the whole city at once."

Cities soon began passing local ordinances regulating movies, and many states established censor boards to cut or reedit offensive scenes, banning other films altogether. Such efforts gained further legal standing in 1915, when the Supreme Court ruled that movies were business, not art, and thus exempt from First Amendment protection.

Further fueling the flames were several high-profile Hollywood scandals, particularly the manslaughter trials of comedian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle in 1921. Although ultimately acquitted, Arbuckle was excoriated by the press, and in the same way the Hot Coffee scandal kick-started a national debate on videogame regulation, Arbuckle's public lashing strengthened calls for government intervention in Hollywood.

To deflect critics, film producers formed the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association (later renamed the Motion Picture Association of America) in 1922, the industry's first genuine attempt to self-regulate its content.

William Hays, former chairman of the Republican National Committee, headed this new office; he hoped his new role would catapult him to greater political—even presidential—glory. But movie pro-



PECTS

Throwing the book at music, comics, movies, and videogames

ducers disregarded most of the content guidelines Hays devised. Even his enthusiastic adoption of the Production Code—written in 1930 by several Catholics involved in organizing mass film boycotts—went mostly ignored for years.

But in 1934, Hays was replaced by staunch Catholic Joseph Breen, who was far stricter than his predecessor. Under Breen's supervision, the Production Code finally grew some teeth.

Under the Code, movies could no longer portray swearing, nudity, suggestive dances, drugs, or blasphemy. Sex "perversions" like homosexuality, miscegenation, and venereal disease were also banned, as well as depictions of childbirth. Adultery, if even presented at all, couldn't appear enticing, nor could brutal murders be shown explicitly.

Ultimately, though, the MPPDA had no enforcement authority: "It's not as if 50 armed policemen were going to haul you away to movie-theater prison for breaking the rules," says Loughney. Still, most studios adhered to the Code anyway, fearing the alternative: government intervention.

Plus, the Great Depression had changed American attitudes toward morality. Large-scale protests by watchdog groups like the National Legion of Decency had pressured the industry to clean up its act. "Times were tough. People became very conservative," Loughney says. "The studios pulled back in many ways."

For the next two decades, Hollywood movies stuck to the Code, but eventually outside competition made the rules obsolete. The invention of television led to movies featuring more sex and violence, as producers scrambled to lure patrons back into theaters. Cinemas also started showing more non-Code foreign films, due to a 1948 Supreme Court decision forcing studios to relinquish theater ownership (the only way these films had been kept out at all).

Another blow came in 1952, when the Supreme Court overturned its 1915 ruling and stated that movies were indeed speech protected by the First Amendment. The decision removed the threat of government censorship, crumbling the justification behind the Code.

And America had experienced yet another cultural shift. "Producers in the late '50s and '60s were tied into a different ethos," explains Loughney. "The generation they wanted to talk to was under 30, so they deliberately made movies that challenged restrictions."

When Antonioni's *Blow-Up* was denied Production Code approval in 1966 (because of a scene of full-frontal female nudity) and MGM released the movie anyway, the MPAA started to consider other regulation options. One year later, they introduced the new movie-ratings system, which, although it has evolved, remains intact to this day.

Although the system isn't perfect (see the 2006 expose *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*), the MPAA ratings have become the gold standard of industry self-regulation. "You can bet that people in the gaming industry are doing their homework on the MPAA," says Loughney. "That's the model they're using to keep themselves alive."

COMICS

Just like movies, comic books experienced a tremendous overnight explosion in popularity, especially among children. In the 1940s and '50s, 90 percent of all American kids regularly read comic books, and by 1954, 150 million issues were being printed every month.

Naturally, it wasn't long before comics-related scaremongering started appearing in the press. In 1947, comics were blamed in a 12-year-old's suicide, after his mother told a jury that he'd loved so-called "crime" comics. The following year, two boys stole >

> "ANY TIME A NEW MEDIA APPEALS TO A YOUTH AUDIENCE, THERE'S A PUSH BACK THAT TENDS TO HAPPEN."
>
> —CHARLES BROWNSTEIN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COMIC BOOK LEGAL DEFENSE FUND

a small airplane, flying it 120 miles across Oklahoma; they later told police they'd learned how to fly from comic books. A few months later, three boys hanged another kid by his neck, torturing him with matches; again, comics were to blame.

By 1948, 50 cities had passed measures banning or otherwise censoring comics. In the mid-'40s, Los Angeles County made it a misdemeanor to sell violent comics to minors, and Philadelphia tried to ban crime comics altogether.

In 1954, child psychiatrist Fredric Wertham released the best-selling book *Seduction of the Innocent*, which lambasted the industry's lax moral standards. Like a proto-Jack Thompson, Wertham called comics' glorification of sadism and violence "the new pornography," arguing that comics contributed to higher rates of juvenile delinquency. "*What must happen to the minds of children*," he wrote, "before parents...will ask for efficient, legal, democratic protection for their children?"

The book ignited a public firestorm and partially inspired the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency to hold public hearings on comics' negative effects on children. Tennessee senator Estes Kefauver (D)—a politician who, like Hays two decades earlier, harbored presidential aspirations—spearheaded these sessions.

"Compare the [Kefauver] hearings to the current state and federal legislative mania toward videogames," says Charles Brownstein, executive director of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fighting comic-book censorship. "It's a natural parallel."

The hearings were a public relations nightmare for the comics industry, and to counteract the bad publicity, publishers united to form the self-regulatory Comics Code Authority. The CCA devised its own strict set of moral standards, modeled closely after the Production Code. Any publishers seeking distribution had to follow it, and many retailers often refused to carry comics without the famous CCA seal of approval.

For more than a decade, the CCA reigned supreme. "Those guidelines neutered the content for at least 10, maybe even 20 years," says Brownstein.

The downfall of the CCA came from an unlikely source: The Nixon administration. Decades before the U.S. military would use videogames like *America's Army* for recruitment, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare recognized the propaganda potential of comics, asking popular author Stan Lee to weave an antidrug message into one of his titles. Lee agreed and in 1971 crafted a three-part story arc in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, in which Peter Parker's best friend, Harry Osborn, gets hooked on pills.

But the CCA forbade any depiction of drugs, however negative, and denied Lee its seal of approval. Confident in his story and Spider-Man's selling power, he published the books anyway. The issues sold reasonably well, with no apparent sales drop from the missing CCA seal, and soon after, the CCA decided its policies needed revising.

Yet the revisions were only a temporary measure, as the CCA's influence continued to wane throughout the underground comics explosion of the 1970s and '80s. Today, the Comics Code Authority still exists, but most publishers no longer submit their titles for review. Instead, many companies have their own in-house rating systems and explicit content lines, like Marvel's MAX imprint.

"Self-regulation in comics is finally behaving as it should," says Brownstein.

MUSIC

Although music has contended with censorship for centuries, the idea of standardized censorship—particularly a universal ratings system—didn't arise until the 1980s, the halcyon days of hair metal, Madonna, and Prince.

In 1984, Tipper Gore, wife of then-Tennessee senator Al Gore (D), caught her daughter listening to Prince's "Darling Nikki," a song about masturbation and casual sex. Horrified, she and several other politicians' wives who'd had similar experiences with their children formed a media watchdog group, the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC).

Among the PMRC's many claims was the accusation that rock music was to blame for juvenile delinquency (comics having fallen out of favor by then), teenage pregnancy, teen suicide, and the "decay of the nuclear family." The group also argued that bands like Led Zeppelin, Rush, and even Queen hid subliminal messages in their songs, encouraging drug use and Satan worship (this was long before similar charges would be leveled against videogame mods). Yet the PMRC scored dozens of interviews with the press, mainly due to the political connections of its members.

In 1985, the PMRC sent out a letter to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) asking that it establish a voluntary music-rating system, much like the MPAA's designations. The letter intrigued the RIAA, which noted with interest that the husbands of some PMRC members were on the committee weighing H.R. 2911 (a bill that would have taxed recorders and blank tapes). So privately, the two organizations started negotiations on a music-labeling plan.

But before the ratings system could be agreed upon, the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation started Congressional hearings on rock music's negative effects. The committee invited testimony from psychologists, senators, and even musicians like Frank Zappa, Dee Snider, and John Denver. Looking back, the "pro-regulation" arguments now appear almost satirical: For example, Dr. Joe Stuessy, a University of Texas at San Antonio music professor, testified that heavy metal was different from previous music genres because "it contains the element of hatred, a meanness of spirit." But the hearings resulted in very little political fallout for either side.

In November 1985, just a few weeks after the hearings ended (and days after hearings on H.R. 2911 had begun), the RIAA announced its new voluntary warning stickers: The "Parental Advisory: Explicit Content" label, a little black-and-white logo informally called the "Tipper sticker."

The PMRC and its allies publicly cheered, but their victory was short-lived. Stores like Wal-Mart and Sears refused to carry labeled albums, and some cities passed ordinances restricting their sale to minors. However, the labels were entirely voluntary; once the RIAA noticed the plummeting sales of explicit albums, they simply stopped using the stickers as frequently.

The move didn't go unnoticed, and the PMRC heavily criticized the RIAA for sidestepping their agreement. But the damage had been done, and the "Tipper sticker" had lost most of its punch.

Eventually, the legislative frenzy surrounding heavy metal stopped when the genre faded from popular favor—only to be replaced by rap in the late '80s and early '90s. In 1987, police arrested a Florida sales clerk who'd sold a 2 Live Crew album to a 14-year-old, the first of dozens of similar cases over the next few years. 2 Live Crew itself was later apprehended on charges of obscenity for performing its own songs.

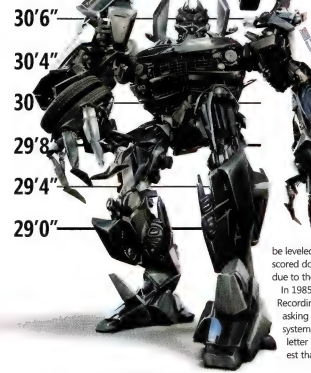
At the forefront of this controversy was Florida attorney Jack Thompson, making his activist debut by calling for bans of the group's albums (along with those of N.W.A., Ice-T, and Madonna).

The music-censorship debate continues, even if the PMRC does not; every few years, Congress holds hearings or introduces new legislation to regulate music. In 1997, Kansas senator Sam Brownback (R) led Senate hearings into the effectiveness of warning labels on music, and in 2001, Connecticut senator Joe Lieberman (D)—a familiar face on the videogame-legislation front—proposed a bill that would have fined record companies up to $11,000 per offense for marketing violent or sexually explicit songs to minors.

Generally, however, the furor about films, comics, and music has died down, replaced by an equal agitation over videogames.

And there's no end in sight. "Any time a new media appeals to a youth audience, there's a push back that tends to happen," says Brownstein. "Videogames are getting the brunt of it now, but it's something that happens with alarming regularity."

"The good thing," he says, "is that at least the industries seem to be doing a better job of fighting back in every generation." ● **Lara Crigger**



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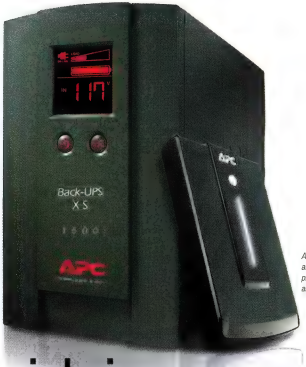

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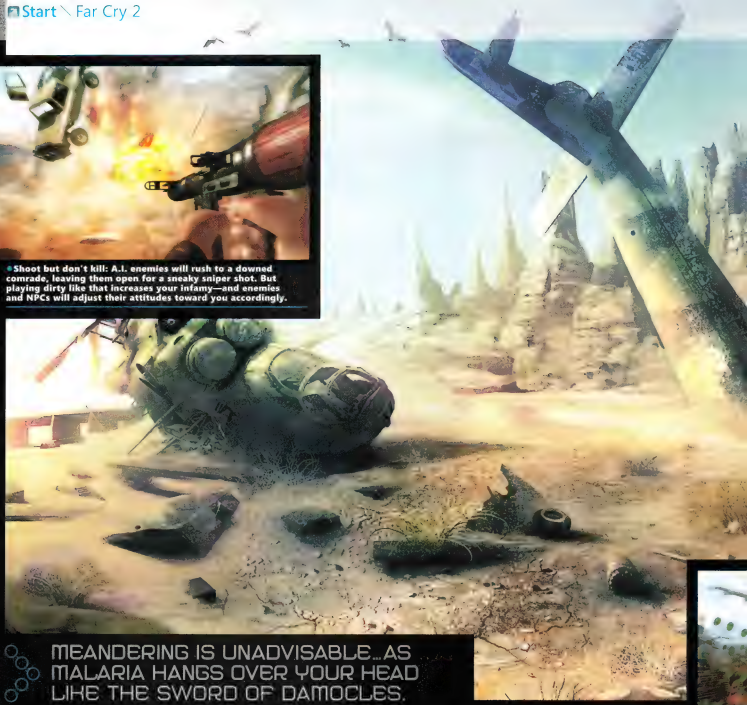

MEANDERING IS UNADVISABLE...AS MALARIA HANGS OVER YOUR HEAD LIKE THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES.

Creative director Clint Hocking says work began on *Far Cry 2* six months after the original's release. "Our mandate from day one was to make a top-tier PC title to reestablish Ubisoft in the PC gaming market—as well as to make a real, true PC sequel to *Far Cry*."

FAR CRY 2

What's in a name?

Publisher: Ubisoft | Developer: Ubisoft Montreal | Genre: First Person Shooter | Release Date: 2008

PREVIEW

No mutants occupy *Far Cry 2*'s Africa. No extraterrestrial tripods with freeze rays to ice the savannah either. And developer Crytek is nowhere to be found, even though the game bears the family name.

Conspiracy theorists might decry new developer Ubisoft Montreal's decision to take the sci-fi out of *Far Cry* as a calculated bid to steer clear of their progenitor's big, scary shooter. But when production on *Far Cry 2* began, "*Crysis* hadn't even been announced," according to creative director Clint Hocking—and wouldn't be until a full year later. "We knew the guys at Crytek had finished *Far Cry*, and we assumed they were working on another game...but we had no idea what it would be. We just did our own thing... what we thought would be the best way to make a sequel to *Far Cry*."

And so this is all Ubisoft Montreal: No hidden design documents detailing Crytek's would-be plans for an imagined sequel, no secret meetings in Munich to discuss protagonist Jack Carver's fate—as a matter of fact, Carver's not coming back either. As Hocking tells it, no one cared.

A LOAD OFF

What sounds like a gutting Hocking spins as a distilling: the dead weight dropped, the essentials of exotic location (sandy tropical shores traded for savannah) and gameplay intact. "We really like the first third of *Far Cry*," says Hocking, "where it was about being alone and having to outsmart mercenaries in their encampments, having to raid their camps, scavenging their equipment, being on the run, disappearing into the jungle, and popping back out and hitting them hard and fast and then getting what you want and then out of there really quick...so *Far Cry 2* doesn't have any mutants, aliens, or any superpowers or psychic powers. It's all about being involved in a dirty little bush war in central Africa and having to use a rusted AK-47 and whatever bits of scavenged land mine you can duct-tape together. It's really improvisational."

FC2's Africa offers one of those seamless, wide-open worlds like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Oblivion* or, more appropriately, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, sans the light role-playing slant. Think: different factions to please or piss off, NPCs with wares to trade and missions to give, dozens of vehicles to take you to whatever corner of the veldt you wish, and different A.I. "buddies" to fight alongside depending on how you react to different situations and which missions you choose to undertake.

Hocking and his team are just about to stitch the pieces of their world together to see how it works as a whole. "It's at that point where we'll see if we have *too much* of that stuff—which is a problem, by the way, if every single tent seems like somewhere you have to go to complete the game...it starts to get really taxing. 'Boy, everybody sure has really important stuff in every shoebox.' But at the same time, we have to make it feel like you're not wandering around doing nothing all the time."

Aimless meandering is unadvisable at any rate, as malaria hangs over your head like the Sword of Damocles: Find more pills before the symptoms strike, and then make sure you have enough on you to finish your mission before you can stock up again. An invisible timer constantly ticks down to physiological disaster (though sometimes the game forces an attack as part of the narrative), and your main source of medicine is the Grassroots Intelligence Network—a civilian faction in the game trying to keep some semblance of sanity in a time of civil unrest. "You're not able to kick down their doors and steal it," says Hocking, warning that, if you play the villain, you'd better not take it too far. "You're going to have to cooperate with them to some extent. They've got it and they're not just gonna give it out to any crazy bastard wandering around."

A potentially cool mechanic—and potentially annoying, though Hocking promises you'll never get caught in an inescapable death loop. "It never ends with a game over. Depending on what part of the story you're in and who your allies are and how many buddies you have...it ends with a situation where you're given enough malaria medicine and forced to take a mission to get more."

THE PERILS OF NOMENCLATURE

As with *Fallout 3* developer Bethesda or any other gamemaker who dares to take another's torch, Ubisoft Montreal faces an inevitable and unenviable battle of perception: "We on the development team don't think about it too much," says Hocking. "The way I like to say it—and the way I've said it to folks on the team—is that our job is to make the best sequel to [*Far Cry*] that we can. If we get worried about the public's perception about what our place is versus some other product or company, it's not gonna help anyone. We're all really excited to play *Crysis*—make no joke, it looks spectacular. And if you go on our forums, there's confusion with the fans—that's understandable. I'm sure some fans will be irrationally like, 'This isn't a true sequel,' or any crap like that...whatever. They're free to think that. I *hope* fans will say, 'Hey, instead of one awesome shooter, we have two.' Why should anyone complain about that?" ■ **Sean Molloy**

THE GFW INTERVIEW: DAVE GROSSMAN

The former LucasArts funnyman tells his tale BY RYAN SCOTT AND SEAN MOLLOY

1989-1991
Begins career auspiciously as a writer and designer on LucasArts' first two *Monkey Island* games.

1992-1993
Partners with Tim Schafer to design, write, and produce the adventure classic *Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle*.

1996-2000
Sets a high bar for writing children's games with the first three adventures in Humongous Entertainment's *Pajama Sam* series (notable for having been played by an unusually high number of adults).

2005
Works as lead designer and head writer on Telltale Games' *Sam & Max: Season One*, considered by some to be the first successful episodic game series.

INTERVIEW

GFW: Comedy is hard. Discuss.

DAVE GROSSMAN: Comedy is work, but it's not hard. Or maybe it is hard, but it's not as hard as drama. Doing drama is like trying to draw photorealistic characters—because it's supposed to look like real life, the audience will be acutely aware if you miss the mark by even a little bit. Comedy is essentially stylized, so people are more forgiving if you're not 100 percent consistent. Just as long as it's funny, that is.

Of course, having discussed this with plenty of other writers, I note that there are two distinct camps, and the other one feels that it's easier to make something true to life than it is to make it funny. Thankfully, both sides are correct.

GFW: Comedians are fond of saying, "Good comedy comes in threes." Based on the structure of your games, you seem to agree....

DG: I use threes very often, but it doesn't have anything to do with the comedy. It has to do with how we tokenize information in our brains, and how I organize challenges to build a dramatic structure for the gameplay. Three happens to be the largest set of things that I'm likely to remember without actually trying. If you send me out to pick up a hot dog and you list three condiments, chances are I'll get it right, but if there are four, I have to take some deliberate action to remember them—otherwise I'll forget one before I've rounded the corner. And if there are three turns on the way to the hot dog stand, I'll get there...any more, and I want a map. In an adventure game, I'm sometimes asking people to remember quite a lot about what they need to do, and breaking things into threes and then more threes seems to be the point where it's complicated enough to feel challenging, but not so complicated that the game turns into a memory exercise. It's science! Sort of.

GFW: So let's talk a little bit about your history. What was life in the early days of LucasArts like? Did you guys ever have a clue that you'd become one of the most cherished game-design houses of all time?

DG: It was pretty exciting, particularly my first year there, when we were still headquartered at Skywalker Ranch. Working in a normal office building was kind of a letdown after being at a dreamy hillside retreat with a top-notch restaurant and its own mountain lion. But a lot of interesting and talented people worked there, and that didn't change when we moved downtown. I remember a lot of talking and looking over each other's shoulders—"synergy" is a word that's been overused to the point of nausea, and it isn't quite accurate for what I want to describe, anyway.... Let's just say we nudged each other to new places that we might not otherwise have gone. Like creative Brownian motion. And while I wouldn't say we could do anything we wanted, we had a great deal of creative freedom, and it took a couple of years before there was serious pressure on the games group to show a continuing profit. We worked pretty hard—but, at least in my case, it felt like I was doing that according to my own drive rather than because someone else expected me to, and that made all the difference.

> "I STILL THINK *DAY OF THE TENTACLE* IS PROBABLY MY BEST WORK TO DATE."

GFW: Did you think much of Sierra's adventure games at the time?

DG: They were interesting and often amusing, but I found them quite frustrating to play. It wasn't so much that you died all the time that bothered me, although I disliked the disruption of the fantasy caused by loading a saved game. No, it was mainly that I always died unexpectedly while doing things that didn't seem the least bit dangerous, like stepping off of a curb. It made the experience feel arbitrary and unfair. If I die after jumping out of an airplane, that's one thing...but if I get killed for walking down to the street corner, it's quite another. My opinion was that curiosity should be rewarded, not punished—and that was one of the crucial underpinnings of the LucasArts design philosophy at the time.

GFW: Many adventure-game fanatics point to *Day of the Tentacle* as the pinnacle of LucasArts' library. How do you feel about it today?

DG: I haven't played it in many a year, but I remember it fondly and still think it's probably my best work to date, though I like to imagine that I've learned a few things since then. I've always felt that *DOTT*'s principal strength was the cohesive way in which the art, dialogue, and gameplay all worked to support this idea that you're playing in a world that's essentially a Chuck Jones cartoon. You don't just look like a cartoon character; you also have to think like one in order to succeed—painting stripes on cats and so forth...and that really helped bring the thing to life.

On the other hand, I also remember a couple of rather long cut-scenes and a lot of exposition at the beginning, which in retrospect feels slow and awkward, and generally is not a good way to tell a story in any medium. I blame inexperience. To me, the best opening for an adventure game is still the one from *The Secret of Monkey Island*, where the protagonist sets the whole thing up with a single line of dialogue: "Hi, I'm Guybrush Threepwood, and I want to be a pirate!" That's all you need to know.

GFW: Any scrapped LucasArts adventure game projects that you can reveal to us? We understand you have a history with the many iterations of *The Dig*, for one....

DG: Well, *The Dig* was eventually finished and released, so it probably shouldn't count as a scrapped project, though the version I worked on with Noah Falstein between the two *Monkey Island* games was quite different from the one that eventually hit shelves. We had lumpy alien creatures with six limbs, and you could eat them before you figured out that they talked. And it was designed as a bit more of an RPG-adventure hybrid than was typical for the studio, with elements of action and resource management. I also worked with Steve Purcell and Collette Michaud on the beginnings of a design for a sequel to *Sam & Max Hit the Road*. It was never produced, but I think some of the ideas popped up later in the console version they were doing at Infinite Machine, and maybe even in LucasArts' ill-fated *Sam & Max: Freelance Police* in 2004. We also had a great concept about planting a tracking device in [fellow designer] Ron Gilbert's skull and following his movements through a model of our building, but I'm not sure that would really fit under the umbrella of "adventure games." More like productivity software.

GFW: Since you never had the opportunity...what kind of story would your ideal *Maniac Mansion 3* have told?

DG: A funny one, I hope. I guess if I were doing it now, I'd consider doing a story about Weird Ed Edison. Now there's a guy with some deeply rooted issues that might be interesting to explore. And I always like to see things from different angles, which is one of the cooler aspects of an interactive medium—so perhaps a revisitation of *Maniac Mansion 1*, but from the Edisons' point of view, as a group of neighborhood ruffians ruthlessly invades their home.

GFW: After graphic adventures allegedly went the way of the dodo, your *DOTT* codesigner Tim Schafer went on to do *Psychonauts*. Did you ever talk to Tim about helping out in some capacity?

DG: I might have been a bit redundant on *Psychonauts*—although we play off of one another very well, Tim is probably all the design and scriptwriting muscle you need for that game. And I'm not all that into platformers as a genre...unless, of course, there's a story that seems to call for that sort of play. If I were making a game of *Ocean's Twelve*, for example, I would want to treat the parts where François Toulour, the cat burglar, goes into action as platformer segments. *Sly Cooper*? Great excuse for a platformer. >

GFW: Why did you and fellow LucasArts luminary Ron Gilbert take a detour into children's games with *Pajama Sam* and so on?
DG: Although relocating was the only thing that kept me from leaving LucasArts to start Humongous Entertainment with Ron, I never had any specific desire to do children's games until *Pajama Sam* came along. By this time, I'd struck out on my own and was freelancing with Ron long-distance, designing and writing the lost *Bobo and Fletcher* adventure games, which he intended to produce when Humongous branched out into grown-up titles—they eventually started the Cavedog label, but *Bobo and Fletcher* was never made.

Then he called me one day and said they were concepting out a new kids' game that was intended to have a peculiar sense of humor, and he thought I'd be ideal for it, and asked me to write the script. It seemed like a nice change of pace, so I gave it a whirl, and it turned into *Pajama Sam*. It was really, really fun. The challenge of writing something that holds the attention of both children and the parents playing along with them is—it turns out—quite interesting. We did several more of them, and I got to write a couple of books besides. The critical success of those games led to projects with Disney and Fisher-Price and Lego and so on—and quite by accident, I became "that guy who does the children's games" for a number of years. And I'm glad to be working for an older audience again, because I like the variety...but I'd do another *Pajama Sam* game in a New York minute.

GFW: You've also self-published a book of poetry entitled *Ode to the Stuff in the Sink: A Book of Guy Poetry*. How'd you dream that up?
DG: In 1995, I started an online project more or less like a blog, where I wrote a piece of verse—usually a funny one—every week, and then e-mailed it to people and posted it on a webpage. This was ingeniously called "The Poem of the Week." It was just for fun, really...kind of a pick-me-up for people arriving at work Monday mornings, but with some ulterior motives about keeping myself writing all the time and avoiding the crippling effects of excess perfectionism. I decided to e-mail them to people so it would feel like a responsibility, and that way I'd be less likely to procrastinate and forget about it.

Apparently that worked, because I'm still doing it today—you can find it at www.phrenopolis.com. At some point, I noticed that I'd done a fair number of poems that had particularly bachelory themes—love poems to pickup trucks and the last beer in the fridge, angsty poems about burning toast and the hopelessness of shaving, that sort of thing. It felt like a good set, so I collected my favorites, wrote enough more to make what seemed like a reasonable-sized book, and drew a bunch of cartoons to go along with them. Then all I had to do was become a book publisher, distributor, and retailer—which is even more complicated than it sounds, but I got some good advice along the way, and in 2002, *Ode to the Stuff in the Sink* was born. It's a very satisfying thing to have hundreds of pounds of your book show up with a thump on the doorstep and then have to figure out where to put them. After that, I breathed a sigh of relief and started doing other things for a while, but I've actually started working on a second book—not a sequel, since it doesn't share the same theme—that I hope to have out next year.

GFW: Do you ever get confused with Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman—the guy who specializes in studying the psychology of killing, and who claims that some videogames ape military training techniques?
DG: On a few occasions, I've run across people in the industry who don't know we're two separate Daves. We'll be talking, and they'll say, "Oh, yes, I think I've read something you've written," and I can tell from the look in their eyes and the way they start to lean away from me that they've confused me with the colonel. I freelanced for 11 years between LucasArts and Telltale, and I have to wonder how many times I didn't get a phone call because somebody thought I was him. On the other hand, I wonder if he ever has problems because people think he has a writing credit on *Total Annihilation*.

I've exchanged a couple of e-mails with him, by the way—and he seems like a reasonable individual. We didn't discuss games.

GFW: How'd you hook up with Telltale Games for *Bone* and *Sam & Max*?
DG: [Telltale CEO] Dan Connors and I were already friends, having been members of an obscure public-access television group together some years earlier. He and [Telltale chief technology officer] Kevin Bruner came over right after they left LucasArts to talk to me about what they were planning. I was interested, but they weren't funded yet and I was already working on a project on spec—I was developing a property called *Insecticide* with Mike Levine, who's building the game now for the PC and DS—and I couldn't afford to do two things for no money at the same time. We stayed in touch, and about a year later the pieces all fit a little better and I signed on. It was the first time I'd taken a "regular" job since leaving LucasArts 11 years earlier, and I felt some trepidation about that, but it's been great! By that time, Telltale had about a dozen employees and was already working on finishing *Bone: Out from Boneville*, its second title. I helped wrap that up, but didn't really get my shoes dirty until *The Great Cow Race*. Eww, did I just say that? Sorry.

GFW: What was it like working on *Sam & Max: Season One*? We'd heard it was "extremely hectic" keeping to that schedule, to say the least.
DG: "Hectic" is a good way to describe it, and more accurate than "crunch." Instead of having one particular part of the development cycle where everybody's working double-time to finish everything, we have a sort of sustained beehive where there's always something happening, always a deadline within a week or so, always something breaking, and steps being taken to correct it. It's more about adaptability to maintain a constant flow of productivity than it is about logging endless hours to build a giant mountain. I think it's probably toughest on the designers, who have responsibilities at all phases of the project, and consequently wind up, not infrequently, working on four separate episodes in a single day, because of the way things overlap.

The worst things always seem to happen the day before we go into the recording studio to do the voices. I dread that day. At one point during *Season One*, an important voice actor had to bow out at the last minute due to an unforeseen emergency. We recast the role before the end of the day, scheduled a new session, and reprioritized people's tasks in the meantime, so it wound up OK...but if we weren't prepared to deal with things like that, it could have been a big, fat disaster. Then, on *Season Two*, gremlins in the machinery were causing lines of dialogue to disappear from the database immediately prior to recording, which was a little unnerving. Did I mention that adaptability is key? Some days it feels like we're the marines. You just have to be ready to shift gears at any time, because losing even one day is a big deal. Some might find that unnerving, but it does keep things interesting.

GFW: Some argue that *Sam & Max* is really the only successful episodic game so far. Why do you suppose Telltale succeeded where a juggernaut like Valve couldn't?
DG: We got into the water gradually, and by the time we attempted the episodic series, we were already pretty confident we could pull it off. We first built several small games on short schedules one at a time—*Telltale Texas Hold'Em* and the *Bone* series—to prove out the engine, work the kinks out of the development process, and develop an idea of how long all the pieces would take the studio to do. By the time we started *Sam & Max*, the remaining issues were mainly about organizing the overlapping production, and we had enough data to do a fairly good job of that up front. After that, it was mostly a matter of taking the schedule seriously and being creative about how to stick with it as time went on.

As for Valve or anybody else, it's hard for me, as an outsider, to say what did or didn't work for them. You mentioned the word "juggernaut," and it occurs to me that having too many resources at your disposal could be a detriment to keeping an episodic schedule. It gives you the ability to second-guess yourself and fiddle with things to make the game just a little bit better, but also quite a bit later. Which, to be fair, might be a rational choice for Valve—they're competing in a different arena than we are, and their priorities would be quite different as a result. But since Telltale is a small startup, we didn't have the luxury to do much fiddling. When you're working without a net, you'd better stay on the tightrope.

GFW: And finally, we've saved the best for last: What drives a man to create a Pumpkin House of Horrors [www.phrenopolis.com/pumpkins]?
DG: Ha! Yes, the Pumpkin House of Horrors is by far the most popular thing on my website. I've made CafePress greeting cards out of a couple of my favorites, and once I was even invited to Singapore to do a carving demonstration, which sadly never came about. All I can say in defense of my disturbed treatment of squashes is...um...well, everybody needs some kind of outlet. And apparently, I need more than one. ●

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CULTURE

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: If there's one thing I hate, it's magazines that reference their own writers and editors inside the magazine in third-person, as if they themselves are interesting. Take it from me—we're not. That's why I balked when I learned that I was to be a key interviewee for this article, written by freelancer Julian Murdoch, about hardcore fanboys and their often raging clashes with developers, publishers, and members of the press. But I did have a rather memorable exchange with the, um, rabid Fallout *community, so, at the risk of charges of solipsism (or worse), I agreed, and appear in the article below. I blame society.*
–Jeff Green, GFW Editor-in-Chief

NEO-LUDDITES AND THE QUEST FOR THE PERFECT FALLOUT

Bethesda has a crappy gig. After launching the blindingly successful *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* in 2006, they started work on *Fallout 3*, a post-apocalyptic comedic romp through a '50s-inspired landscape of grumpy robots and groin shots. Based on the setting presented in *Fallout* (1997) and *Fallout 2* (1998), Bethesda took over the license in 2004 after the collapse of publisher Interplay.

That's when the postnuclear turds really hit the fan.

Within days of the announcement that Bethesda would pick up where Interplay had left off, the largest and most vocal fansite for the game, No Mutants Allowed (www.nma-fallout.com), worked itself into a frenzy. Thomas Beekers (known as Brother None on the forum) posted the news on July 12, 2004. A casual observer might have believed that the resurrection of a beloved world by a dedicated, respected RPG developer would be a good thing. But the relationship between Bethesda and the fan community got off to a bad start, to say the least.

"This is possibly the worst news I've heard since *FOBOS* [*Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel*]," posted forum user Spazmo, referring to 2004's critically panned Xbox and PlayStation 2 action-RPG spin-off. "Bethesda is crap."

The community divided into two distinct groups: those preaching the apocalypse of postapocalyptic gaming, and those—like forum moderator Beekers—who pled for rationality. "I refuse to judge this," he later wrote. "Bethesda has done some pretty good games.... It's a matter of wait and see."

In the intervening years, the traffic on No Mutants Allowed, various *Fallout*-centered blogs, and Bethesda's own community forums has rarely waned. Each minor revelation about *Fallout 3* creates a firestorm. And while many—if not most—in the community have discussed developments rationally, the acerbic nature of the forumgoers is often all that comes through the noise.

A CRIME OF PASSION

In July of 2007, this magazine's editor-in-chief, Jeff Green, had an opportunity to see some of Bethesda's vision for *Fallout 3*. "You may now begin to believe the hype," Green wrote on his blog at GFWJeff1UP.com. "After sitting in the hour-long presentation at E3, I know I am." He went on to describe making *Fallout 3* as "a creative challenge that in the wrong hands could be utterly cheeseball, but that Bethesda is so far re-creating beautifully."

ILLUSTRATION: JOSHUA HANSEN

How enthusiasts turn "eagerly anticipated" into "summarily dismissed"

RECIOUS?

> "I REMIND MY GUYS THAT NOBODY WORKS UP THE ENERGY TO GET ON THE INTERNET AND WRITE 'EVERYTHING IS FINE.' IF PEOPLE AREN'T WRITING ABOUT IT, WHAT'S UP WITH THAT?"
>
> – TODD HOWARD, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, *FALLOUT 3*

In this short blog post (and the subsequent discussion on the *GFW Radio* podcast), Green made unexpectedly large waves. While commenters on his blog (and in Bethesda's own forums) were overwhelmingly excited about the developments shown at E3, the hardcore *Fallout* fansites fired invective, arguing that Green (and the gaming press in general), were incapable of objective opinion, often using language not fit to print.

On No Mutants Allowed, the first response to Green's blog post was a simple one-liner from user Sorrow: "That's f***ing pathetic." Again, forum moderators and many community members pled for rational discussion, but the angry few overwhelmed the conversation. "We're an abrasive community with some bad elements, which is not really unique in how the Internet works," explains Beekers.

Todd Howard, the executive producer on *Fallout 3* for Bethesda, has become inoculated to this kind of controversy, because he understands it. "I remind my guys that nobody works up the energy to get on the Internet and write 'Everything is fine,'" he explains. "If people *aren't* writing about it, what's up with that? Either they don't care, or we're playing it too safe." And Bethesda has no interest in playing it safe.

"The whole reason we wanted the license is that we're fans as well," continues Howard. But at the same time, they knew they weren't going to make *Fallout 2.5*—they were going to start from scratch. "Reinvention is one of our core philosophies. Sequels aren't 'plus ones'—this old thing with a new change." So instead, his team started with what they liked best about the old games—the setting, the humor, and the ink-black irony of the world—and started making a new game. A Bethesda game. "That's just how we work."

But they continue to face heavy pushback from the community. The lead developer on a competitive class-of-2008 RPG put it this way: "There's no f***ing way I'd want to be in their shoes. No matter how great that game is, they're screwed. The *Fallout* guys are nuts." Needless to say, this person asked to remain anonymous.

FACING THE ACCUSER

Bethesda is far from alone in facing the negative feedback loop of the Internet. When 2K Boston (then known as Irrational Games) first started leaking hints that their franchise-bet title, *BioShock*, would feature a world based (improbably) on the philosophies of Ayn Rand and the quasipolitical >

"THERE'S NO F***ING WAY I'D WANT TO BE IN [BETHESDA'S] SHOES. THE *FALLOUT* GUYS ARE NUTS."
—ANONYMOUS DEVELOPER

***Fallout* old (left) and new (right): Isometric fences and one-inch-tall assassins versus motion-blurred explosions and first-person perspective.**

objectivist movement, creative director Ken Levine became a lightning rod for an entirely different set of fanboys: policy wonks.

A typical post from 2K's forums by member Apostate: "I think what we have in *BioShock* is not actual objectivism...it has been twisted, perverted, and—worse—carried to its ideological extreme." Levine's strategy has been simple: Just try not to engage. "There are basically two kinds of people in the world," he says. "The people you can argue with and the people you can't argue with."

And yet, it's hard not to listen, no matter how negative the conversation turns. "What people think about your game really is relevant—because, at the end of the day, they're the ones taking the 60 bucks out of their wallet to buy the damned thing." And so developers *do* listen. "Finding that balance between listening to other people and not listening to other people is what makes somebody good at what they do or not," concludes Levine.

As for Bethesda, they've been listening. Pete Hines, vice president of PR and marketing, lives at the bloody front of the *Fallout 3* battle. From his perspective, despite the noise, the job is pretty simple. "It doesn't take all that long to figure out what it is people want or don't want," he claims. "We've known what they've wanted since 2004, and I don't think anything that they want has changed."

XTRAS

Historical relics from the Flame War: Relive the battle between GFW EIC Jeff Green and the Fallout fan community at GFW11.1UP.com.

1UP NETWORK

And therein lies the conundrum for the developer of any sequel. Levine's team at 2K Boston took on the *Tribes* franchise (with *Tribes: Vengeance*) prior to beginning work on *BioShock* in earnest, and he encountered a similar kind of fan resistance. "You're dealing with a group of people who basically want their original game with better graphics," he argues. "There might be a way to give them something different and satisfy them...but I didn't know what that was."

PRETTY HYPE MACHINE

Complicating all of this is the role of the press. In looking at a game as it develops, magazines and online outlets face a no-win situation. "It's like previewing a movie when the actors are still standing in front of blue screens," explains Green. "Imagine how jarring it would be to read an article on a movie that said things like, 'So far, the dialogue looks sharp, and though the sets have yet to be finished, we have high hopes, given the director's track record, that this will be a movie we want to see this fall.'" And yet, this is precisely what many game previews do.

"If you go too easy on a game and don't approach the article with any real questions...then what the hell are you, other than a free ad for the product?" Green says. "It's a tough, tough line." The editorial process is designed to draw that line. Where it breaks down, or at least becomes wavy, is on the Internet—in blogs, podcasts, and forum posts. Here, the immediacy of the medium circumvents the introspection of monthly publication. "If I'm writing on my blog, it's me sort of talking out loud, diary-style, in an unofficial way," Green says. "But in reality, I probably just need to realize that anything I say is going to be interpreted as 'official.'"

But both sides of the dialogue recognize the value of the medium, even with its opportunities for miscommunication and heartache. "It's message boards, blogs, and niche-run communities that are changing the dialogue," argues No Mutants Allowed's Beekers. "One journalist coming over to interact with us on our forums is 1,000 times more valuable than the 50 uninformative, bland previews we have read." And Green agrees. "I like the interaction. I think it can help make us more vital and dynamic and honest," he says. "Community is a good thing."

For a developer like Bethesda or 2K Boston, community interaction, especially on sequels, can only go so far. They can't spend so much time communicating that the game doesn't get made. "If you don't want us to make this game, you're going to be disappointed, because we're making it," concludes Bethesda's Hines. "And if you're not willing to give it a shot—well, then we appreciate what you want, but we're gonna move on."

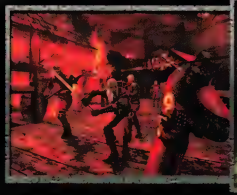
2K Boston's Levine puts it a little more bluntly. He has no interest in making games to serve a sequel-starved fan base. "Games take three or four years. I'm almost 41 years old. I'm going to be dead soon. I don't have four years to toss into being a human Xerox machine." ●**Julian Murdoch**

PAPER MAYHEM

At the August 2007 GenCon game convention, Wizards of the Coast announced that the granddaddy of all role-playing games was getting a refurb. We're talking about old-school *Dungeons & Dragons*, the pen-and-paper kitchen-table game that involves lots of dice rolling and Doritos. As Bill Slavicsek, the R&D director for Wizards puts it: "We've learned a lot about *D&D* by looking at MMORPGs." The changes will be murky until the big rulebooks roll off the presses next May, but they look to be dramatic—faster leveling, more clearly defined battlefield roles—not unlike in an massively multiplayer online RPG.

Fan reaction was just as you'd expect in any videogame fan base: polar. And by "polar," we mean that one pole reacted with "we'll see" apathy and the other pole reacted with immediate effusions of bile. "They're essentially trying to kill *D&D*," says Jared Lindz, a thirtysomething dad and dedicated Dungeon Master from Indianapolis. "It's like that Reese's commercial. Keep your damned MMO out of my pen and paper, you bastards." Whether or not the concoction will be a tasty treat remains to be seen, but Wizards has an uphill battle on their hands.

There is no good, no evil – only decisions and consequences



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The Freeloader

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Maybe it's just the fourth Jack in the Box Ultimate Cheeseburger that I downed today, but I'm feeling nostalgic for the good old days this month. Back when men were men, FMV games were considered the pinnacle of high computer-gaming art—and you could still find the occasional 2D shooter on the PC. Simpler times, those. Fortunately, I'm not the only one getting gaming flashbacks. • The Freeloader

• What is it about dames and guns that always makes for great pulp fiction?

FATE BY NUMBERS

FILE UNDER: **FMV, where you been?** URL: **www.fatebynumbers.com**

The dame was loaded. Walking into the room, she could kill a man with her legs alone...god! I loved those old noir detective stories! Why the hell can't they make more stuff like that? It's kinda like with full-motion-video games. Both flooded the market at the height of their popularity. In the end, though, how many really stood out?

So imagine my delight when I heard some industrious designers made their own FMV detective-noir graphic adventure game: *Fate by Numbers*. Seriously, guys, I'm not joking here—it's a fully functional tribute to classics like *Under a Killing Moon*. Oh, sure, you gotta deal with a 1.2GB download just to install the game, but c'mon, we're talking about a proper graphic adventure that you probably woulda paid real money for about 10 years back. The game itself isn't just true to the era with some good, some bad, and some god-awful acting—it also happens to be fun.

The black-and-white treatment gives *Fate by Numbers* a *Blade Runner*–meets–*Sin City* vibe. The game features some classic graphic-adventure staples: Interview suspects, look for onscreen hot spots, interact with the world, and try to figure out the mystery. The only mystery for me right now is figuring out how I should refer to the main heroine. What do you call a female private dick? >

XTRAS

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TAGAP

FILE UNDER: **Postal penguins** URL: **www.tagap.net**

TAGAP isn't some crazy acronym for a terrorist-busting organization or clandestine secret society. Oh, no. It's just easier than trying to call this game by its proper name: *The Apocalyptic Game About Penguins*.

In the future, a plan hatches to raise a cloned penguin army for various nefarious purposes. But you're not one of the regular rank-and-file penguins. It's time for you to break out and stop the madman behind this sinister plan.

You start off by escaping your gestation tube armed with an Uzi, blowing the living crap out of other penguins in a 2D side-scrolling shooter.

Makes perfect sense! Who comes up with stuff like this and isn't under the influence of something? Oh, and if this oddball description of the game hasn't sold you yet, I've got two words for you: Zombie. Penguins.

A TRIBUTE TO THE ROLLING BOULDER

FILE UNDER: **Rock 'n' roll** URL: **www.kloonigames.com/blog/games/boulder**

Indiana Jones really screwed it up for Native American fertility idols all over the world—and it wasn't until I played *A Tribute to the Rolling Boulder* that I finally realized the truth. Just think about it for a second: For a couple of millennia, you're just hanging back, soaking up some rays in South America. Then, when you're in the middle of your 2 millionth umbrella drink, it's all ruined. Some jerk comes into your house, busts up the floorboards, screws with the home-security system, and drags you outside. How messed up is that?

Why, back in my neighborhood, that's cause for a good ol'-fashioned ass-whuppin'—and you get to do just that in this game. The premise: Ever since Indy raided the sacred caves, fame-seeking archaeologist wannabes who don't know their ass from Abner Ravenwood

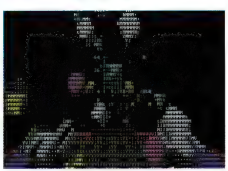
keep trying to desecrate the idols. Your job, as the infamous boulder, is to roll over as many as possible to protect the treasure. Don't just do it for the statues or for simple revenge. Do it for the Hovitos!

SHOOT 'EM

FILE UNDER: **Kick ASCII** URL: **http://tringl.mx-3.cz**

Here's a game that may—if only for a second—shut up all those annoying graphics whores out in the audience. I mean, here's a basic shooter constructed entirely out of ASCII art. *Shoot 'em's* big hook is that all of the objects that pop out—the turrets you control, for example—are constructed of numbers, letters, and other such characters. So, technically, this digital firing range is brought to you by the letters M, T, and the comma.

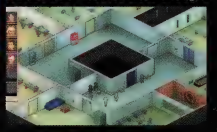
How does *Shoot 'em* work? Sometimes, the name says it all: Simply blow up incoming debris composed of basic keyboard characters.

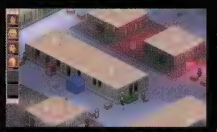


Keep the debris from hitting your shields, but keep a close eye on your ammo supply. The game quickly turns into a chaotic shooting gallery where the entire screen fills with explosions and you have to balance ammo and health.

INDIE PICK OF THE MONTH

It's not free—but it's close enough!





I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't alert you: I've augured signs, and the gods of independent gaming are displeased. And by "gods," I mean the poor schlubs who slave away making games so that you can forget about your own miserable life for two friggin' minutes. Kick these guys some money, will ya? Jeez! Anyhow, time for me to spotlight yet another game that might actually be worth some cash.

Urban Legend (www.euthanize-today.com) instantly earned major points from me for a couple of reasons. Most of them revolved around the fact that, to this day, I've still yet to see anybody successfully pull off a proper tribute to one of my favorite games: *X-COM*. The only difference here is that *Urban Legend* also mashes in a little bit of *Syndicate Wars*' stark, dystopian social commentary, only with cutesy, blocky pixel-artwork characters. That's right: If you wanna blast the living hell out of Lego figures, you've got a taste of what *Urban Legend's* all about.

Truth be told, this ain't gonna replace *X-COM*. However, this turn-based tactical game got just enough right for me to download it and enjoy it for what it is—a satirical look at the future. If you can look past some of the slightly off English translations, you'll definitely pick up on the *Soylent Green* undercurrents.

The only letdown: the "guileful and deadly dangerous A.I." bullet point on *Urban Legend's* website. Are they talking about my own teammates? True, I've got a merc goon squad (upgradeable with new weapons and cybernetic implants), but these morons had trouble hitting the broad side of a barn with a shotgun. Believe me, I tried. All the caveats and warnings aside, *Urban Legend's* not a bad deal at 20 bucks. Besides, who knows when the next good turn-based squad strategy game will come along?

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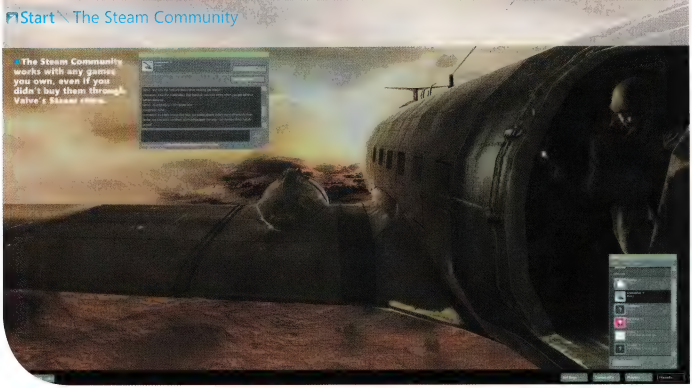

THE STEAM COMMUNITY

How it happened and where it's heading

INTERVIEW

In August, Valve unveiled The Steam Community, a social network with universal voice chat, stat tracking, personal and group profile pages, and more. (Plus, it all works via an overlay that is available even while you're gaming.) We ask Valve project manager/engineer Erik Johnson about how it happened and where it's heading. ● **Shawn Elliott**

GFW: When did Valve begin building The Steam Community?

ERIK JOHNSON: About a year and a half ago. The fundamental problem we're working on is how to make it easier for people to play with their friends—being able to schedule events and allowing everybody to join servers automatically when that happens. We cut more features in the first release than we actually shipped.

GFW: Such as?

EJ: Sharing and sending files—mods, device drivers, demos. And in terms of people having an online space, an online persona, there's a lot of potential. Say someone posts in our forum—you see a piece of their profile from The Steam Community....

GFW: Are you looking at tiered levels of functionality for games sold through Steam versus those that aren't?

EJ: This is not just for Valve games—that was one of our requirements from the start. So any feature we add to The Steam Community is something that any third party can use too. And then there's the ability to launch any application through Steam and still have access to the Community overlay.

Valve employees play games that aren't on Steam, and we wanted to use our voice communication and friends list with these. That's one reason we added the functionality. And then, well, what should people expect to pay for these services? For us, the answer is simply "using Steam." Then at some point they might buy one of the products on Steam. Or not.

GFW: Is this the long-term plan? The Steam Community pays for itself by broadening Steam's user base, since you can't buy through Steam if you're not on Steam?

EJ: We will not charge for The Steam Community and its features. Never even entered our mind. Part of it is to address the fact that when folks first bought *Half-Life 2*, Steam didn't offer many reasons to stick around. It didn't do enough for customers, and it didn't justify itself. So I suppose we're paying off a debt now.

GFW: Any interest in something similar to Xbox Live's Achievements system?

EJ: Oh, definitely. We want to do something sort of like that with *Team Fortress 2*.

GFW: With Achievements, Microsoft sets certain rules and conditions, so that, say, *Wee Kids Drag Racing* isn't offering 6,000 points compared to *BioShock*'s 600. Will Valve regulate its system in the same way?

EJ: We're not sure we need to do that yet. In our case, we're going to use The Steam Community, whereas third parties still own their customers. When you buy *Doom 3* on Steam, you're still an id customer. We want to get more tools to third parties, and let them deal with customers directly. It's not a case where everybody comes into the fold and has to play by our rules.

GFW: Sure. But points are only ever worth anything in policed environments where people agree to acknowledge their worth.

EJ: Points aren't necessarily what we're going to go with right out of the gate. Instead, we'll introduce individual accomplishments specific to each game.

GFW: Whether it's intentional or not, you're going head-to-head with Games for Windows Live. How much attention have you paid to Microsoft's plan? Is it influencing your timing and feature set?

EJ: Honestly, I don't think that it's influenced us a whole lot. We knew nothing about Games for Windows when we did the original design work on The Steam Community. We're pretty capable of shipping things as late as possible.

GFW: Will Steam support in-game web browsing via the Community overlay?

EJ: We went around and around on that, but we're not going to include a full-on browser to compete with Firefox. But we wanted a way for people to be able to copy a friend's profile and paste the URL. I think it has back, forward, and refresh buttons along with the URL itself.

GFW: As the house that *Half-Life* built, does Valve's connection to Steam cause publishers to second-guess the platform?

EJ: I don't think so. Having id selling their games on Steam will hopefully put an end to the idea that we're somehow building an empire to destroy our competitors. ●

FORGOTTEN REALMS

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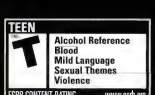

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RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month

1 GLORY DAYS

The high tide of gaming is upon us. The holidays! While everyone grabs the big-name titles, check out *Glory Days 2* for the Nintendo DS. In an age of big-budget shooters and high-profile sequels, this modest little hybrid of *Chaos Defender*, *Defender*, and *Revive Raiders* managed to win us over.

2 WORLD OF WORDCRAFT

An MMO word game? We've now officially seen it all. Take a trip over to the Human Brain Cloud (www.humanbraincloud.com) for some seriously freeform gameplay. Do some random word association and then go see what's on other people's minds.

3 COMMANDER KEEN

The moment of Software announced it was dropping all of its classic games to Steam, we only wanted to know one thing: When can we download the side-scrolling classic that put the Doom bringers in business? (By the way, it's still awesome.)

4 PHILLY CHEESE

As you read this, the sickest sitcom going is on FX: *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. Twisted plots tackle hookers, homelessness, steroids, underage drinking, drug addiction, incest—nothing's sacred. Got your interest? Grab the season one and two DVD and then jump right into the new season.

5 WATCH THE WATCHMEN

In a trilogy of Russian books fellow-ing a centuries old truce between good and evil, a "police force" on either side ensures an uneasy peace. Maybe you've even seen the first film based on the novels, the high-styled if slightly lax *Night Watch*. It breezed through theaters last year. Now the second movie is coming to DVD here in the States. *Day Watch* follows the evil enforcers that keep the light-siders in check.

6 MOD WATCH

Sometimes, all it takes are a few good mods to pull you back into a game you've already beaten. That just happened with *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*. Among the better ones: Float32 (for improved system performance), X-46 Advanced Battlearmor Suit (to start with superbuffed armor), and Horror (though still in alpha, it adds new effects, monsters, and items).

7 R. KELLY'S CLOSET

A couple years back, R. Kelly got trapped in the closet, creating arguably the longest, weirdest music video ever conceived. Well, he's out again. *Trapped in the Closet: Chapters 11-22* continues the screwy hip-hopera. Rest viewed under the influence. No, seriously, what the hell was he thinking when he put this together?

8 BIORHYTHM

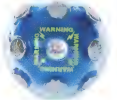
If you listen closely at the start of *BioShock*, you'll hear a big band version of "Beyond the Sea" piping into the bathysphere chamber. That sent us back to our ol' CD stack, and we blew the dust off Jimmy Luxury and the Tommy Rome Orchestra. *A Night in the Arms of... (aka My True Love Is...)* is an awesomely strange mix of hip-hop and jazzy lounge music. What do you call that? Swing-hop? Check www.jimmyluxury.com for more tunes.

9 MASHUP MANIA

Nothing like a couple mashups to make those long, lonely dungeon raids speed right on by. Nelly versus The Cure. Missy Elliott collides with Cypress Hill—and that's just a small taste of what's online. It's high time you check out our favorite site for free tunes: www.goodbliimey.com/tunes.

10 THE SHOCKER

It may look like a plasmid, but what better way to torture friends and enemies alike than with a game of hot potato? Only in this case, said potato is full of electrodes and a couple AAA batteries. You can buy the Shock Ball for about $15 at www.thinkgeek.com.



DEVELOPER DESKTOPS

What gets Chris Taylor through the day when he isn't playing the role of Gas Powered Games' supreme commander?

GAMES

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F.E.A.R. FACTOR

Monolith's monster walks again as *Project Origin*

BY SHAWN ELLIOTT

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

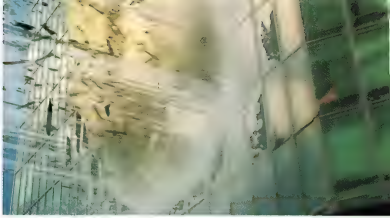
***Project Origin* producer** Troy Skinner is refreshingly frank when I fish for info on design decisions. Critics and forum users complain that both of Monolith's current-gen games nail a few notes and neglect others entirely. Not enough variety, in other words. What I want to know is whether the studio contemplated combining *Condemned* and *F.E.A.R.*, one a study in pervasive oppression and tooth-swallowing punch-outs, the other a vehicle for rip-roaring firefights against uncannily clever A.I.

"You know," Skinner answers, "there is a camp within the company that wants to create that game, including our director of technology, who screams at the two teams, 'Why won't you guys just put 'em together?' So it wouldn't shock me if that is in Monolith's future, but *Project Origin*'s not the game that's gonna pursue that. Plus, it would introduce a whole new set of problems to solve."

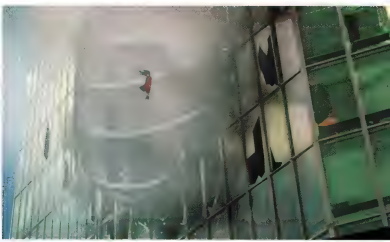
Although there are always ways to restrict access to a long-range arsenal and then reintroduce it later, and as much as *Condemned*'s evidence-collection angle might add another layer of interactivity, Skinner insists that Monolith is relying on other means of redressing *F.E.A.R.*-related shortcomings in its rebranded sequel, *Project Origin*. And the studio also needs to assert ownership over the franchise by demonstrating that it does *F.E.A.R.* best, so to speak, because, for all the scuttlebutt about mashups, *Origin*'s story starts with a split.

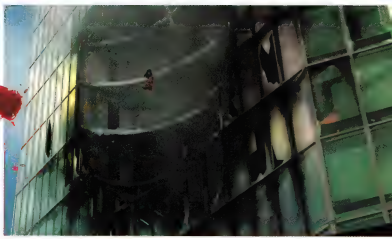
Skinner strikes me as less candid on the topic of Monolith's breakup with longtime publishing partner Vivendi Games. Nothing sinister has to have happened. However, it's surprising to see a profitable and ostensibly productive partnership come to a quick end, especially when both parties show sustained interest in the fruit of their former marriage (see: Vivendi's ongoing string of *F.E.A.R.* expansions). According to Skinner, though, the divorce wasn't painful, however peculiar the terms of its settlement: Vivendi retains rights to the *F.E.A.R.* name along with the option to produce expansion packs for the original game; the rest—characters and scenarios included—remain Monolith's.

Given the game's small scope, I ask if he frets over a *F.E.A.R.*-flush market. "Videogame sales are a mystery, and it's disingenuous to say I'm not concerned about the amount of *F.E.A.R.* games coming out," Skinner admits. "But I



GIRL, UNINTERRUPTED
This time around, psychic brat Alma touches more than minds. Rather, she remakes the world in her wake with an unsettling effect similar to that used on the other side of the looking glass in Konami's *Silent Hill* horror series.





would also say—without being a bastard—that we're disproportionately talented people. Plus, economic necessities come into play when you make expansion packs; [there's] much less time and much less money, and that affects the product. I speak as a producer, though, in the sense that I respect the constraints they're working with. Personally, I think they missed the tone. [*F.E.A.R.: Extraction Point* developer TimeGate] took the horror in a different direction and did things that weren't quite to my taste. At the same time, since our A.I. is so complex, it's hard to set up—so much so that I'd feel uncomfortable if you printed anything that's disparaging or disrespectful."

I compare it to comic-book creative teams that take turns writing and illustrating superhero sagas—everything is challenging when the >

• "We considered drawing on *Akira* when we conceived our 'Alma effect,' but decided against it," says Skinner. You sure about that?

sandbox and toys both belong to someone else. "Sure," he says, "and we have the same problem when we hire people who come from *Call of Duty*, from *Prey*, wherever it is, and they haven't got the thing that we identify as being the 'it' about our game."

You apply a particular approach for one employer to the point that you see it as part of your identity—that goes for any line of work, so why not gamemaking? "That's the thing. You come off like a c*** when you say, 'Hey, that's *Call of Duty* gameplay,' and they go, 'How many units did *COD* sell? I wear my Activision colors with pride! I am *Call of Duty*!' Well, I understand you *were COD*...only you're *Project Origin* now. Our combat is not methodical position-to-position migration."

Revise or evolve whatever else, the "it" must remain. "Monolith sees combat as a sandbox. Make a move, and the A.I. has a variety of viable options, all appropriate to how a military unit might react. This means we have to construct maps in a certain way, so that the action always revolves around players regardless of their position," says Skinner. "The challenge, of course, is that real-life spaces aren't set up like that. Another big deal is that we want the destruction to be an inch from your face. The sweet spot is between five and 10 feet—beyond that, fights become static in the sense that you're stopping, shooting, and moving forward after finishing them. And then we want to design so that stray bullets destroy stuff." That bullets chop off concrete and pulverize plaster, that desktop clutter and filing cabinets feed deadly cyclones is a point of paramount importance: It says that impoverished imagination isn't the problem, it explains the series' cubicle-farm and laboratory settings, and it exposes the logic underlying *Project Origin* locales like hospitals and grade schools (read: apparatuses, crayon boxes, and Trapper Keepers aplenty).

CLIFFS NOTES TO A SUPERNATURAL TOM CLANCY STORY

Project Origin opens in a hospital, half an hour before the mushroom cloud crowns "the Auburn area" in *F.E.A.R.*'s big-bang finale. You are not *F.E.A.R.*'s protagonist, known as the Point Man, nor are you associated with his paranormal outfit. Instead, you're an anonymous D-Boy, attached to a counterterrorist detachment called Delta that aims to arrest Armacham president Genevieve Aristide. "Your team isn't exactly

MECH WARRIORS
A portion of *Project Origin* takes place under urban skies. Mechs march through Auburn's streets, often with an infantry squad in formation at their feet. They fan out as soon as better cover becomes available (or when your grenades force them apart).

"OUR COMBAT IS NOT METHODICAL, POSITION-TO-POSITION MIGRATION."
–MARY SHANNEN DAUGHER

aware of events across town," Skinner says. "You approach her high-rise. When you arrive you see that the service staff (has) been shot to death. Something is afoot, so you head upstairs where an Armacham ambush awaits."

During our chat, Skinner smirks when describing Armacham's "bioengineered psychic bulls***." Not that the territory we're in is any screwier or more convoluted than the crosses and double crosses rampant in best-selling shooters, although tracking so many task forces *and* spec ops teams *and* tactical combat units tends to short-circuit even the militarily minded. For sanity's sake, see Armacham as brokers in funny business, and know that they want Aristide dead. "She's their scapegoat," as Skinner says. "So like this is the setup and then suddenly, boom, all hell breaks loose." As does Alma >

• Delta, Armacham, and rogue Replica clone soldiers wage three-way war in *Origin*. "Sometimes you show up after a fight between them, sometimes as they fight, but all three sides are opposed," Skinner says.

Why can't we combine Origin's slow-mo superpower with the ability to catch or kick aside incoming grenades? "Not a bad idea," Skinner laughs. "I might crib the idea without crediting you!"

The ghostly girl who comes up as *The Ring* or *Dark Water* or *Akira* in the pop-culture center of our conscious, Alma is *Project Origin*'s star player. "Rather than being about the protagonist, we want our world to be about the antagonist," Skinner says. "We've always understood how we'd develop her character, whereas the hero stayed somewhat sketchy—weirdly, a secondary matter. We just wanted it to work like Jaws or Godzilla or whatever." The message is that Monolith's split with Vivendi is not motivating the change of player-controlled character. "The only difference is that we can't call the unit F.E.A.R., and that's where Delta comes in." Or is it? "We aren't starting with our original protagonist," he adds, "because when we began, there were multiple *F.E.A.R.* projects in the making that we didn't want to bump into."

I highlight how he says "starting with" and ask Skinner how he'll explain his new protagonist's time-stalling ability since (spoiler alert!), unlike the original, he isn't Alma's son. *F.E.A.R.*'s plot already revealed the Point Man's twin, and a triplet scenario stretches the "psychic bulls***" into absurdity and beyond. "We'll tie it up over time," he says and smiles. And will the Point Man appear again? "It's possible." "Sure, so it's inevitable," I say. Now he's laughing: "If you print that, then I'll prevent it from happening. 'What, we recorded 200 hours of voiceover? Who cares? Throw it on the floor!'"

In line with the design logic that presses devs to solve multiple problems with a minimal number of solutions, Monolith is leveraging Alma to boost environmental variety. "She impinges on the world with this—we think of it as a membrane that people pass through—and as her powers expand it takes up more and more real estate. I'm not talking about Alma screwing with one person's head; she's actually transforming the world," he says. "Even I-have-no-psychic-powers-Charlie can see it. Everyone." Here, however, we approach the threshold of a PR plan to trickle out tidbits over the months preceding *Project Origin*'s 2008 release, and Skinner's reduced to nods and intimation. Something, I gather, is on the other side of Alma's looking glass...Skinner suggests it will scare us in ways that *F.E.A.R.* wasn't always able to.

SCARE TACTICS

At first, *F.E.A.R.* matched its namesake. Eventually its recycled incidents reappeared at intervals until the FPS exhausted itself with treadmill

ONLINE LOWDOWN

Multiplayer is a lock and, according to Skinner, "a significant step forward from *F.E.A.R.* We want more depth and development, and we're shooting for a sustained experience." Whether that means objective-based play and/or character customization/persistence he won't say.

VISIONARY

***Origin* delivers its heads-up display via a visor the hero wears. Blood and saliva splash on it, but Monolith has yet to decide if you'll raise your hand to wipe it clean.**

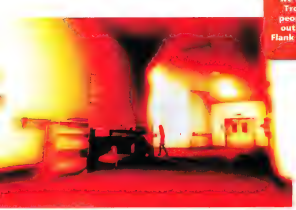
"OUR HORROR ELEMENTS DIDN'T HAVE TEETH. THEY NEVER TURNED LETHAL."

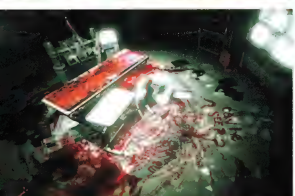
scare tactics. Jumping out and yelling "Boo!" only works once; after that you've got to up the ante. Skinner agrees. "We're addressing that. Our horror elements didn't have teeth. They never turned lethal," he says. "We're layering a whole new—well, without going into great detail, the player has precognitive abilities. We'll use this to f**k with you in the sense that you see things that may or may not play out precisely as you saw it." Thwarted expectations are everything. *Condemned* loaded lockers with ammunition, tempting you to rummage until it was routine. Later on, a bogeyman burst out.

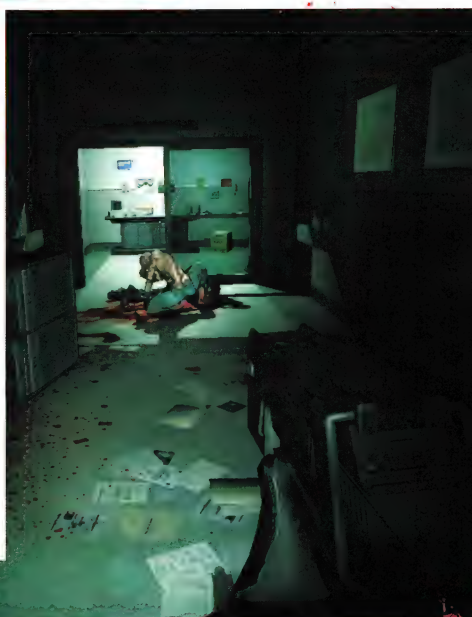
Lights off, Skinner demonstrates a piece of *Project Origin*. A Gollum-like ghoul lopes across the walls. "Abomination," he says, "another Armacham job gone wrong. Now and then the folks they torture crave brains and cartilage. >

COVERAGE PLAN

***Project Origin* allows players to overturn heavy objects, creating impromptu cover. "The reason we didn't do it in the first game," producer Troy Skinner says, "is that we were afraid people would build forts and sit and fight it out. Meanwhile, we're like, 'No! Get going! Flank them! Our bad guys do great things when they've been flanked!"**







grow double-joints and long incisors, lose hair.... Hey, they're psychic, though. There's a price to be paid. He hears Alma in his head and scrawls stuff in blood...can't quite crack the code. Instead of sticking to insubstantial or over-the-top scares, I suspect we'll have him stalk you, and when you're genuinely worried, he'll strike." In the sequence I see, the jittery thing tears at your jugular, and you wrench its jaws apart.

The scene is scripted, but Skinner isn't ruling out other modes of mano-a-mano interaction. "We're messing with a disarming move, only it's not working well at the moment," he admits. "In theory, the enemy either pulls a pistol or sees a gun on the ground and tries to get it. The problem—and I could've saved us like $20,000 if I didn't do this—is that, when you kick the weapon out of the dude's hands, you're still sitting there holding a shotgun. And so he goes to get a gun that's 10 feet away, but you've shot him in the back before he's halfway there. He looks like he's become bored with the fight, because he doesn't live long enough to show you what he was gonna do."

Intelligence only counts when it's communicated. You've likely heard tales of playtesters squealing "Aha! Look how brainy they are!" after programmers add voice clips that allow A.I.s to announce their tactics, but the point is momentous when behavior is your game's chief hook. On the other hand, the danger with bots who say what they're doing each and every time they do something smart is a diminished sense of discovery. *F.E.A.R.*'s truly standout moments were double takes: "Did that dude actually lay low, only to ambush me as I moved on?" (Skinner says he did indeed.) But if "that dude" cackles, "I tricked you!" the delicate tension between showing and telling skews lopsided.

"Here's another candidate for the cutting room floor," says Skinner. "And I might've designed it, so again it's me pissing away money. We have this whole set of 'burning alive' A.I. behaviors. One idea we junked that went with it said that if someone was set on fire, his squadmates should put him out of his misery. But that looked broken. Instead of shooting the guy with the gun, I take time out of my busy schedule to put a bullet in my buddy? Dumb."

Dialogue would do the trick, I kid.

"Yeah. 'Here, Jimmy, I'll save you...by killing you!' So instead he'll drop and roll, dive into water, or just plain panic." >

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HEALTH CODE VIOLATION
Monolith's nixing the bandage boxes. "We never want you to feel like you ought to cower in a corner and fight from there," Skinner says. "This time we're instating a progressive health scheme rather than making you manage inventory in frantic firefights."

● "The nail gun? I'm not saying it's back, but Jesus, it pins people to walls!" says Skinner. "I shouldn't even say this, but the plan is to pin people to moving objects." Mechs maybe?

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

During his demo, Skinner wields what looks like an incendiary laser in that its finger of blast-furnace heat instantly ignites any flesh it touches. So when he starts describing a flamethrower that squirts a napalm jet rather than a big billowing flame, I ask what for, when the other weapon serves the same function.

"Now you've forced this out of me," he says. "The thing in the demo? That's a flaser, dude. We didn't have the laser done and we didn't have the flamethrower done. There will be severing, and there will be burning—and never the twain shall meet." He twists the tap off when I ask about the laser, however, other than to concede that it cuts clean through limbs—info for rival media outlets and, as always, another part of the PR plan.

"Make any new weapon more than another trigger to squeeze"—this isn't Monolith's maxim, but it might be. As with *BioShock*'s plasmid powers and *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun, environment, enemy interaction, and even narrative put *Project Origin*'s torch apart. "Armacham is cleaning house," explains Skinner, "eliminating all evidence of their part in *F.E.A.R.*'s plot. One character has a huge flamethrower—he's there to blow it up and burn it all—and that's where you find the weapon as well. And, yeah, when you introduce incendiaries, you have to provide flammable material along with the A.I. behaviors we've been talking about—otherwise burning is just another way to waste a guy. We see it as a showboat weapon. The experience sags if you use it exclusively for two hours straight instead of a 20-minute stretch where you're willing to sacrifice some lethality for the sandbox feedback."

The gap between *F.E.A.R.: Perseus Mandate*, another Vivendi-published expansion pack, and *Project Origin*'s gunplay is already apparent, I say. Again, he's not one to snub the sweat of another studio. At the same time, being Monolith ought to matter, and I ask whether he thinks the name carries mainstream cachet. "We're either good or we're not good, and the market is efficient," he answers. "It'll tell us which one we are." ●

XTRAS

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Reviews

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THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

Let's hear it for 2K Boston, aka the Studio Formerly Known as Irrational Games (yay for dull corporate branding!). After a decade of developing such highly acclaimed (yet financially futile) titles as *System Shock 2* and *Freedom Force*, the house that Ken Levine built finally hits it big—both critically *and* commercially—with *BioShock*.

I won't dwell too much on *BioShock's* merits here, because our review pretty much says it all, but I must commend the folks at Irrational...errr, 2K Boston...for their dedication in addressing a few of the game's fairly serious launch-day problems. The developer responded to ATI video driver instabilities and SecuROM copy protection issues (both of which lit up the official *BioShock* forums like a Christmas tree) with the speed of an ER team, with Levine himself working overtime to personally assure just about every last gaming website in existence that (in no uncertain terms) the developers had made mistakes and were speedily rectifying them.

Yeah, we love to complain when games don't work *exactly* right, straight outta the box, but nothing's perfect. But when a developer shows the kind of commitment, promptness, and upfrontness that Irrational...errr, 2K Boston...does with regard to fixing stuff, we can't stay mad for too long. ● **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

INSIDE

HILL

World in Conflict

Ground Control grows up—and how.

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SMASH

Madden NFL 08

Fumble the pork rinds and feed on pigskin

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Medal of Honor: Airborne

Plastic Man meets Sgt. Rock.

70

World in Conflict changes history, one mushroom cloud at a time.

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10 point scoring scale to inform you, in a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 5+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award

Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a GFW Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

9-10: Excellent

Great (and rare) – universally recommended.

7-8.5: Good

Enjoyable enough to us, with some flaws.

5-6.5: Average

Status quo. Only game enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad

Significant flaws or fundamental design issues.

0-2.5: Terrible

Never should have been made.

MEET THE CREW

REVIEW CREW 1UP NETWORK

The Review Crew is the 1UP Network's ensemble cast of game critics from all of our print and online publications. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as experiences.

RYAN SCOTT
REVIEWS EDITOR
GFW's reviews taskmaster is typing this at 1:30 in the afternoon, and desperately craves food.
Current Faves: *Guild Wars: Eye of the North*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR
See how Sean's face looks here? At this point, it's basically stuck that way.
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft, BioShock*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
STAFF EDITOR
Despite much skepticism, Shawn agreed to put down his *Naruto* games to play *BioShock*.
Current Faves: *BioShock, Quake Wars*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

GORD GOBLE
STAFF REVIEWER
"Goble. Gord Goble." If you ever hear those words, you're probably pretty much done for.
Current Faves: *Test Drive Unlimited*
1UP.com Blog: gordhollo.1UP.com

RORY MANION
STAFF REVIEWER
HI MY NAME IS X. I LIKE TO PLAY Y. SOMETIMES I WEAR DEPENDS FOR FUN.
Current Faves: *BioShock, Company of Heroes*
1UP.com Blog: Reato_Jenkins2.1UP.com

ERIC NEIGHER
STAFF REVIEWER
Judging from this photo, Eric may very well be the modern-day incarnation of Maxwell Smart.
Current Faves: *BioShock, World in Conflict*
1UP.com Blog: TheFrimFramSauce.1UP.com

JOE RYBICKI
STAFF REVIEWER
Joe's been playing PC games since *Zork II*, and he's still stuck in maximum verbosity mode.
Current Faves: *BioShock*
1UP.com Blog: DPMJoeR.1UP.com

CINDY YANS
STAFF REVIEWER
No, Cindy will not join your stupid *WOW* guild that's named after an Eminem song.
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: Cindy_Yans.1UP.com

TODD ZUNIGA
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When you're 1UP's resident sports guy, PC ports are your own personal hell.
Current Faves: *NBA Live 08*
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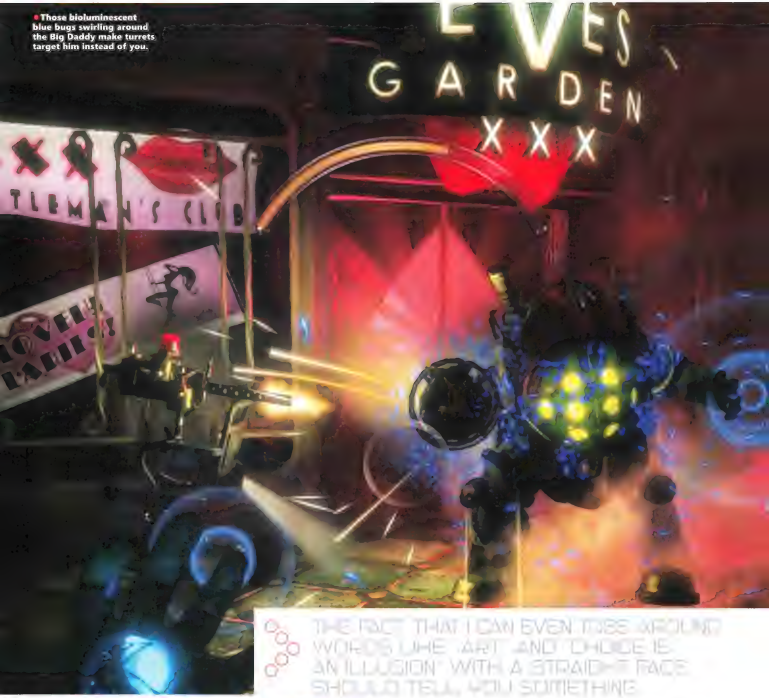


Those bioluminescent blue bugs swirling around the Big Daddy make turrets target him instead of you.

THE FACT THAT I CAN EVEN TOSS AROUND WORDS LIKE 'ART' AND 'CHOICE' IS AN ILLUSION WITH A STRAIGHT FACE SHOULD TELL YOU SOMETHING

Follow Big Daddy and his Little Sister until you find the perfect picnic spot.

Just one reason why Fort Frolic is one of the best levels ever.

BIOSHOCK

The player becomes the played

PUBLISHER: 2K Games | DEVELOPER: 2K Boston/2K Australia | GENRE: First-Person Shooter | AVAILABILITY: Retail, t-tail (www.steampowered.com) | ESRB RATING: Mature | MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.4GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 8GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, Internet connection | MULTIPLAYER: None | VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

● **Surgical masks, ritual masks, masquerade masks: Fugliness is one nasty side effect of Adam abuse.**

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE
Games for Windows

Two corpses, dressed to the nines, embrace on a filthy mattress in the back room of a bar. A bottle of sleeping pills lies spilled on the floor...and judging by the texture and color of the couple's skin, they downed the missing tablets months ago. An old tape recorder—one of many left conveniently scattered around the underwater museum/mausoleum of Rapture—crackles with the thick Russian accent of the woman on the mattress, wailing that she had just spotted her missing daughter on the street, and that she had become one of those...those *things*—the Little Sisters, the living dead dolls that crawl around Rapture, consuming corpses and calling them angels. Screw the ammo in the corner and the gene tonic hiding in the wall: In *BioShock*, sometimes a room is the greatest reward.

A MAN CHOOSES

Here's a game that serves as the perfect counterpoint to Roger Ebert's notorious assertion that games ain't art (if you care about such crap), and not just because Rapture really *is* a magnificent museum of the morbid, its fascinating tape-recorder diaries like discarded Alcatraz audio-tour headsets. Ebert cites "player control" as one of gaming's biggest hurdles to the "A" word, but *BioShock*'s big message is that *choice* is largely an illusion. You think you're making decisions, but really, someone else is pulling the strings, whether it's a character quite pointedly planting thoughts in your brain or level designers directing you to the next important hallway.

"You are being manipulated," *BioShock* says, over and over again. Puppeteers hand out unassailable assignments, reservations (is Tenenbaum playing me now?) and ethical objections (did Sander Cohen just ask me to become a cold-blooded murderer?) be damned. Instead of asking, "How would you like to do this?" *BioShock* asks, "How do you feel now that you've been forced to?"—and, on a few occasions, it gives you the opportunity to say a cathartic "f*** you" to the crazy postobjectivist monster who just played you. Then it grins and asks again, "*Now* how do you feel?" *BioShock*'s greatest achievement is getting you to answer back.

While games like *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* offer muddy morality choices through dialogue trees, *BioShock* offers only one clear decision with any big repercussions: Kill little girls or save them? Pitch-black or glowing white? Either option leads down surprisingly similar paths, the only major difference being an unfulfilling "bad" endjog that basically says, "Even when you choose, you've got no choice."

While you have little say in what path you wander, you ironically have plenty when it comes to how you follow it: Mix and match plasmids, weapons, and incidental explosive barrels to your liking—or don't. *BioShock*'s combat machine contains a finite number of moving pieces, but they all fit together perfectly. A big part of the game's success comes from crafting your own fun: Endless resurrection means any battle can be won through attrition, and by the end, it's possible to take down a Big Daddy with a short, simple series of incendiary crossbow bolts—but it's far more satisfying to scout a location, set a stage, make the A.I. performers dance, and then reload if it doesn't go according to plan. My most satisfying battle involved pitting two Big Daddies against one another while I just kicked back and watched. For you, frag grenades might do just fine.

VISIBLE BRUSHSTROKES

The fact that I can even toss around words like "art" and "choice is an illusion" with a straight face should tell you something: In Rapture, a little rote mission design (collect four of these, three of these, then bring them back here) and a few physics bugs that leave corpses twitching for all eternity are trivia. That the hacking minigame gets old halfway in, or that ammo vending machines serve no logical purpose in a utopian society, or that there's a damn escort mission at the end are matters of academia. The truth is, I've never been so emotionally involved in an escort mission before. Games don't normally warrant the kind of discussions I've had about *BioShock*. This is something special.

So I have to admit: I got a little teary at the "good" ending. I'm not telling you this to show you how deep I am or so that you can call me a sissy; I'm telling you simply 'cuz that's what happened. After turning me into a living arsenal for 20 hours, *BioShock* took about 15 seconds to utterly disarm me. ● **Sean Molloy**

PC VS. XBOX 360

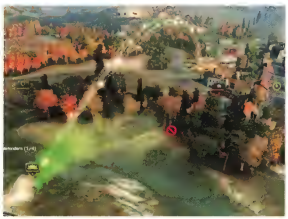
One choice is not an illusion: If you have the computer to handle it, pick the PC version of *BioShock* over the Xbox 360 one. The PC version offers higher resolution, better controls (the UI makes combos hotkey-quick), and more options to tailor the way you play—including the ability to prevent key items from flashing and giving themselves away.

VERDICT

- **Brilliantly realized world; extraordinary combat; high level of customization.**
- **Minor physics and A.I. bugs; slightly out-of-place end boss battle.**

10/10
EXCELLENT
Games for Windows

World in Conflict offers a compelling 'what if the other guys won?'



Heavy artillery is thin-skinned, but if you pair it with forward observers...

...artillery can turn even the most fortified position into overcooked borscht.

Terrain plays a big role in combat, affecting both the speed and range of ground units. With my advantageous position on this knoll, I've got those Commie bastards on the run.

WORLD IN CONFLICT

Shall we play a game?

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Games** DEVELOPER: **Massive Entertainment** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU (2.2GHz in Windows Vista), 512MB RAM (1GB in Windows Vista), 9Gb hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **None: Final Reviewable**

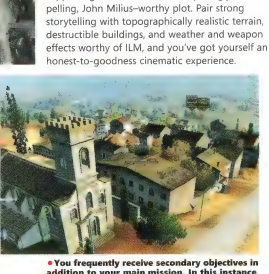
REVIEW

Of the many grand "what if?" scenarios of history, perhaps none captures the popular consciousness more than "what if socialism hadn't failed?" Two of the most enduringly popular alternate-history fantasies (or nightmares, depending) are those in which either national or just plain ol' socialism continues to exist and thrive. Philip K. Dick's novel *The Man in the High Castle* is the most interesting take on the "Nazis win" version. But it may surprise some people to find that a computer game—namely Massive Entertainment's new *World in Conflict*—features the most compelling exploration of the "Commies win" (or, more accurately, "Commies-don't-go-down-without-a-fight") scenario.

WOLVERINES!

Like any good epic, *WIC* starts *in medias res*—circa 1989. Rather than allow perestroika to turn it into a capitalist society, the U.S.S.R. decides not to go gently into that good market economy. Without warning, a Red Army blitzkrieg (into Germany, appropriately) sends Europe reeling like it hooked a 20-pound bass. U.S. forces scramble to help, but no sooner do they secure the European front than the Russians get all Pearl Harbor on downtown Seattle. Lt. Parker—your alter ego—straps on his M4 Carbine and jumps into the defense of the Pacific Northwest.

Of course, it's not called *World in Conflict* for nothing. Once you're done making sure the grunge movement goes off without a hitch, the game transports you to France, Germany, Russia, and finally New York City. Along for the ride is a cast of eminently relatable (if a tad cliché) supporting characters...and a surprisingly compelling, John Milius–worthy plot. Pair strong storytelling with topographically realistic terrain, destructible buildings, and weather and weapon effects worthy of ILM, and you've got yourself an honest-to-goodness cinematic experience.



• You frequently receive secondary objectives in addition to your main mission. In this instance, I'm supposed to recapture a French village without damaging this 12th-century church—which has, of course, already surrendered.

WORLD IN CONFLICT IS LESS "REAL-TIME STRATEGY" THAN "REAL-TIME LOGISTICS"

GLOBAL THERMONUCLEAR WAR

Still, all the nifty graphical effects in the world won't get a game anywhere without compelling gameplay, and *WIC*'s got one of the most innovative RTS models since *M.U.L.E.*

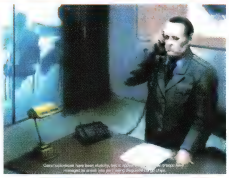
Evolved from the highly regarded *Ground Control* series, *WIC* does away with the standard whip-the-peons resource accruement regime, instead providing you with an ever-recharging pool of logistical "points" with which you simply buy units. If your boys get pureed, you get their initial cost reimbursed to your pool. No tech tree, no production cycles, no rock-paper-scissors unit breakdowns—you just buy what you think you need and go at it.

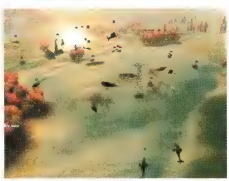
The trick is that your resource pool isn't available whenever you want, with some lag between when you get points and when you can actually buy units with them. This aspect is critical, because every game's about one thing: occupying locations on the map with ground units. Lose too much of your army too quickly, and the enemy may hunker down before you can scrape together a counterattack. On the flip side, every kill nets you "tactical aid" points. Accumulate enough of these and you can call in off-map support ranging from whirlybird scouts to nuclear strikes.

The upshot of this gameplay model is that *World in Conflict* is less "real-time strategy" than "real-time logistics." How well you manage your supplies (and interfere with your enemy's ability to manage his) is far more important than how quick you are on the hotkeys or whether you've got a surefire rush tactic planned for each map. This sort of meaningful change to the typical RTS model is welcome, especially when it comes to multiplayer.

TOE-TO-TOE WITH THE RUSSKIES

Of course, change is sometimes scary—and *WIC* packs a vertiginous learning curve. Even with a dozen or so games under my sexy cummerbund, I felt like my choices were far too random. Multiplayer is especially exacting, requiring impeccable teamwork and constant communication to keep matches from capsizing into total pandemonium. Add some unit balance issues—antitank troops and helicopters are too strong, APCs are too weak—and acolytes are sure to flee quickly.





• A couple of NATO Mangustas take on...the entire Russian 3rd Armored Division.

But in spite of its problems, *WIC* undoubtedly has that ineffable "it" that makes an enjoyable game. In a market glutted with RTS games that are little more than reskins of one another, Massive deserves credit for trying something genuinely new. Sure, it's risky to rock the boat, but that's what capitalism's all about—you don't see North Korea coming up with new RTS ideas, do you? **• Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

+ Innovative gameplay; entertaining plot and characters; face-melting graphics.

– More "controlled chaos" than "strategy"; A.I. ain't Rhodes scholar material.

8/10

3000

Games for Windows

MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR—KINGDOMS

Braveheart* meets *Apocalypto

PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **The Creative Assembly** GENRE: **Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.totalwarmovie.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 16GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, *Medieval II: Total War*** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

Install *Medieval II: Total War—Kingdoms* on your PC and you get not one, not two, but *four* separate executables and desktop shortcuts to enjoy—you can almost hear developer Creative Assembly shouting, "Cripes, man, look at how much game you're getting here!" And it's true: *Kingdoms* is a monster of an expansion, though instead of piling on new features or fiddling much with the game design, it takes the route of simply offering players a ton more to do. You liked the first game? Well, here's a lot more of it, dammit.

TETRALOGY

Pretty much everything we said about the original *Medieval II* holds true here: the turn-based campaign is the game's strength, and the real-time battles are impressively detailed and tactically rich, but ultimately too same-y. (I personally prefer tapping the "autoresolve" button and playing the game that way.) The developers evidently understood the campaign's strength, too, as that's the crux of the new content: four complete, very distinct new campaigns—titled Britannia, Crusades, Teutonic, and Americas—with new maps and factions to play with.

A new faction in *Medieval II* isn't the same as a new faction in most RTS games, of course; the difference between the Aztecs and Wales is hardly the difference between the Protoss and the Zerg. And so the maps are the biggest draw, as they focus the theater of war to the Middle East (in the case of the Crusades campaign) or the New World (Americas) or a far more detailed representation of the British Isles (Britannia) than you stomped on in the original *Medieval II*.

That's a whole lot of new ground to cover, especially given that the campaigns play out quite differently depending on what faction you choose. Pick Aztecs, and you find yourself pitting legions of infantry against Spain's abundant conquerors in shining armor; pick the Teutonic Order, and priest agents become paramount; pick any faction in the Britannia campaign, and priests (and the game's entire religion mechanic, really) are nonexistent. Major events—such as the arrival of a Crusading noble to join in your jolly pagan fox hunt, or the forming of a new faction—keep you on your toes and inject personality, encouraging you to almost "role-play" the tyrannical zealots or freedom-fighting underdogs you're controlling.

> YOU LIKED THE FIRST GAME? WELL, HERE'S A LOT MORE OF IT, DAMMIT.

For those who *are* into the real-time battles (I was bored of them in the original long before I grew tired of the campaign), the game boasts a new unit count somewhere over 100, but I suspect most players will parse everything as "weak infantry," "strong artillery," or "shoots arrows" anyway—even when they're hurling hornets' nests or javelins instead. I suppose someone out there might be paying close attention to all the stats of the varying units, so they know what separates one spearman from the next—but for me, *Medieval II* already has enough numbers to worry about. I'm still busy counting desktop shortcuts. ● **Sean Molloy**

VERDICT

- **Tons of new content.**
- **No major new features.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

● ***Kingdoms'* campaign supports local 2-player "hot seat" matches. Online skirmishes are still restricted to one-off real-time battles only.**

THREADSPACE: HYPERBOL

No, the title never makes sense

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Iocaine Studios** GENRE: **Action/Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.atari.com or www.steampowered.com)** ESRB RATING: **Everyone 10+** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 400MB hard drive space, Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Final Downloadable**

REVIEW

If creativity is the hallmark of a successful indie game, *ThreadSpace: Hyperbol* secures Iocaine Studios' credentials: Think real-time, multiplayer-only *Worms* on the z-axis, and you've scratched the surface. *Hyperbol*'s spaceship-to-spaceship combat employs pool-table ballistics—where curve, spin, and projectile speed define trajectory. It's great fun, hamstrung by a few bad decisions.

Hyperbol's tit-for-tat is more tennis match than rock-paper-scissors. Every bolt and bomb has a countermeasure, from shot-reflecting Repulsors to matter-gorging Singularities...and most every weapon can multitask or combine to create new effects. Experimentation under fire constantly reveals enough new armament alchemy to make combat consistently engaging, despite an all-but-vertical learning curve.

Know-how and a quick trigger finger aren't the only requirements for effective play, unfortunately. Poor implementation of character leveling and ship upgrades make multiplayer excruciating for middling players—and impenetrable for newbies. Ranked-tiered servers lock "Trainees" in experience-point purgatory. Competition of similar skill level and with comparably powered ships rarely, if ever, arrives. Once free from the grip of low-rank servers, players begin an arduous grind to "Pro" viability—stock ships simply don't have enough staying power to fend off the upgraded rigs of dedicated veterans.

Competitive difficulty is one thing, but it's hard to stress how badly these ill-conceived systems cripple what is otherwise an excellent multiplayer experience. If Iocaine doesn't hammer out a more inviting atmosphere for new converts, all the clever balancing and solid concepts in the world can't save *Hyperbol* from LAN-only obscurity. ● **Rory Manion**

● **Showdown at the Confusingly Busy Corral.**

VERDICT

- **Excellent concept with good execution...**
- **...broken by a punishing leveling system.**

6 \10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

KNOW-HOW AND A QUICK TRIGGER FINGER AREN'T THE ONLY REQUIREMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE PLAY UNFORTUNATELY

ONE PAD. TWO CHOICES.

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MADDEN NFL 08

Behind the times

PUBLISHER: **EA Sports** DEVELOPER: **EA Tiburon** GENRE: **Sports** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU (1.8GHz in Windows Vista), 256MB RAM (1GB in Windows Vista), 2.1GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

It's high time that EA Sports stepped up the quality of its PC productions, because porting last-gen console games just doesn't cut it anymore. *Madden 08* is pretty much a high res version of the Xbox (*not* 360) game, littered with enough sugarcoated upgrades to distract you—until you dig deep into the gameplay.

The new weapons feature, for example, is a great way to differentiate the superstars from the subpar stars, but this doesn't make it any easier for one of these studs—or any player, really—to break up a pass or put a hit-stick tick on a ball carrier because the controls in those areas are plain unresponsive. The game looks sharp, but closer inspection shows a lack of dif- ferentiation in the player models. The addition of smart routes that allow defenses to deny passes on first down is welcome, but throwing the deep ball *still* means *far* too many home-run receptions. In fact, QBs have no limits on their ability to hurl the ball a mile—even while on the run—with a simple flick of the wrist. No windup necessary! Also of note: Throwing the red flag to challenge a referee's call is plain busted; the zebras miss a handful of obvious calls, and they don't fix them after going under the replay hood.

But the game's biggest sticking point is its A.I.—new-gen *Madden* underwent an over- haul, but you wouldn't know it from playing this port. And the worst part is that you don't have a choice: If you want NFL football on the PC, this is the only stop. It's not a bad game, but it's a shame this afterthought wasn't better. ● **Todd Zuniga**

● **San Diego Chargers TE Antonio Gates is all but unstoppable—mostly because *Madden*'s pass defense is still dreadful.**

VERDICT

- **The weapons feature is a welcome addition.**
- **Half-assed Xbox port; wonky A.I.; unresponsive defensive controls.**

5\10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

NEW-GEN *MADDEN* UNDERWENT AN OVERHAUL, BUT YOU WOULDN'T KNOW IT FROM PLAYING THIS PORT

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 08

Everything old is...well, mostly still old

PUBLISHER: **EA Sports** DEVELOPER: **EA Tiburon** GENRE: **Sports** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM (512MB in Vista), 3GB hard drive space, 64MB videocard (128MB in Vista)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-4 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

If you put a gun to my head and demanded I choose between the Windows and Xbox 360 versions of *Tiger 08*, well...things might get a little messy. On the one hand, this version is somewhat more realistic in its approach to the game. And it's considerably more forgiving in the putting department, which is a welcome change.

But, oh, those character models. Watching these dated-looking, mannequin-esque golf- ers stomp woodenly through the lush, detailed links is like a crash course in the theory of the Uncanny Valley. In fact, much of the game feels like an afterthought to its more modern- seeming console brethren. The stat system, for example, is drastically simplified, and absent are the skill challenges that allow you to build up a created character's abilities.

This version is geared more toward the real- life golfer, though, with more courses, a more complex shot system, and a vastly more realistic PGA Tour mode (in which you start out as a nobody, rather than jumping right in against the pros). Better yet, the elegant "TrueSwing" system returns; the action of pulling smoothly back on the mouse and pushing forward—with the proper tempo, direction, and speed—is the closest thing to actually playing the game we're likely to see for a while.

Of course, aside from the marginally effective confidence system—which boosts or hurts your accuracy depending on how familiar you are with a hole—you'll find hardly anything signifi- cant enough to justify a purchase if you already own *Tiger 07*...or even *06*. ● **Joe Rybicki**

● **Half the fun is listening to the announcers berate you for hitting into "the cabbage."**

VERDICT

- **Gorgeous environments; excellent putting system; more realistic than the console versions.**
- **Feels like an after- thought to the consoles.**

7.5\10 GOOD

Games for Windows

MUCH OF THE GAME FEELS LIKE AN AFTERTHOUGHT TO ITS MORE MODERN-SEEMING CONSOLE BRETHREN.

NHL 08

Skill-stick, same old shtick

PUBLISHER: **EA Sports** DEVELOPER: **EA Sports** GENRE: **Sports** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone 10+** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.3GHz CPU, 256MB RAM (512MB RAM in Windows Vista), 2.7GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Gold/Retail**

REVIEW

The good news: The revolutionary Skill Stick feature, a concept introduced on the Xbox 360 *last year*, finally makes its way to the PC version of EA's *NHL* franchise. The bad news: just about everything else. The truth is, *NHL 08* plays a decent game of hockey...as it should, considering the nearly 15 years that EA's had to purportedly refine it (and thusly force every competitor into early retirement).

But how did PC hockey fans become second-rate? Last year, we were deemed unworthy of both the Skill Stick feature and that brain-melting "next-gen" graphics engine. This year, while EA fawns all over the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 crowd with even better graphics and innovations such as dynamic A.I., practice modes, enhanced Skill Stick capabilities, and a nifty system whereby you can develop and *record* custom plays, PC gamers get to languish in the very same "last-gen" technology reserved for the ancient PS2. If this sounds like sour grapes, it is.

It may be damning with faint praise, but *NHL 08* does offer a few token upgrades. Apart from the nifty Skill Stick, which transfers the majority of hockey-stick functions to your gamepad's analog thumb control, the game delivers American Hockey League and European Elite league integration, reintroduces a playoff-only mode, and adds minor Dynasty enhancements. Otherwise, it looks the same, plays *perhaps* moderately better (the star players are just that—and the advantages of smart positional hockey are evident), and brandishes the same clumsy, ported menu interface of recent efforts.

If you're a complete hockey newbie, prepare for some fun. If not, dredge up last year's copy or borrow your buddy's 360. ● **Gord Goble**

HOW DID PC HOCKEY FANS BECOME SECOND RATE?

● **Ottawa's Dany Heatley (right) rocks Anaheim's Teemu Selanne with a legal (but painful) elbow.**

VERDICT

- **The best (and only) hockey game on the PC; Skill Stick is an interesting but now-dated wrinkle.**
- **PC version = PS2 version, and that sucks, big-time.**

5/10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

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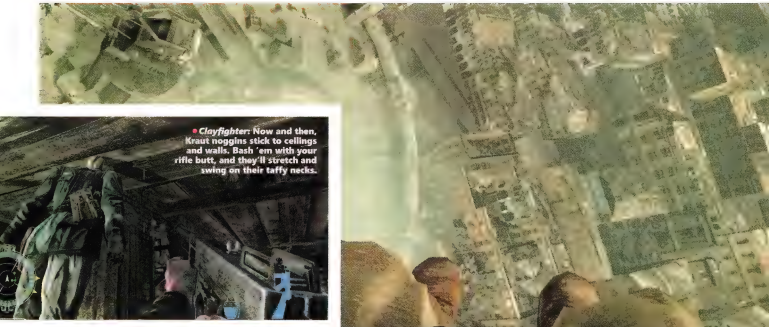

• *Clayfighter:* Now and then, Kraut noggins stick to ceilings and walls. Bash 'em with your rifle butt, and they'll stretch and swing on their taffy necks.

MEDAL OF HONOR: AIRBORNE

Sgt. Rock in silk

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: EALA GENRE: First-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.4GHz CPU (Intel P4 Windows Vista), 1GB RAM, 9GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-32 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Retrievable

REVIEW

Everyone would want to play *Saving Private Ryan*'s Daniel Jackson; the sharpshooter's superhuman efficiency under pressure guaranteed it. And I'm sure the private's last stand was on Steven Spielberg's mind as the director inked the DreamWorks Interactive deal that put *Medal of Honor* on shelves in 1999, one year after *Ryan*'s box-office debut. Only, when Jackson's Springfield rifle went click-clack-boom, somebody died. When I shoot Jerry, he as often as not does a jack-in-the-box number.

Games drawn from history don't have to be realistic. This isn't *that* argument. *Saving Private Ryan* took liberties with the truth, too, though the difference is that of Jackson forgetting to rezero his rifle sights and still shooting a German sniper straight through his own scope, and *Medal of Honor: Airborne*'s Gestapo men who step from a train, firing MG42s from the hip like jackbooted John J. Rambos. But Spielberg's war movie, alongside HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*, established today's authenticity trend—to the extent that anything less looks like yesterday's kitsch. And *MOH* certainly isn't advertised as a John Wayne film, let alone a *Captain America* comic.

As *Brothers in Arms* and *Call of Duty* challenge *MOH* by inching further along the believability spectrum, it's impossible to imagine an anonymous EA level designer sneaking the Red Skull and assorted superstormtroopers into the game—while, elsewhere, advertising material touts the studio's "commitment to historical accuracy and authenticity." However it happens, the people marketing the game aren't making it, and—just *maybe*—aren't even playing it. That's too bad, though; *Airborne* is a good game.

As in any arcade punch-athon, paratrooper Boyd Travers tops off his health bar by walking into flashing power-ups (first-aid tins rather than roast poultry). And as in role-playing games, repeated use improves weapon proficiency. In the same way that *Airborne* transforms German flak towers into a daring assault on one the size of the Death Star, it turns the fact that real GIs often modified guns in the field into rifles that fire faster and more accurately after >

MOH CERTAINLY ISN'T ADVERTISED AS A JOHN WAYNE FILM, LET ALONE A CAPTAIN AMERICA COMIC.

• **"Autograph this s*** for me, son?"**

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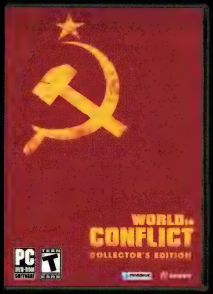

No Tricks Here, Only Treats!

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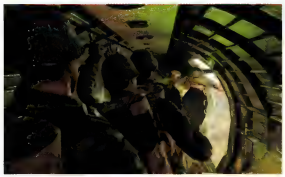


• *MOH: Airborne*'s in-the-sky spawn system takes the sting out of death.

• *Airborne*'s otherwise rote online element—team deathmatch and territory control—offers one new wrinkle: an "Airborne" version of each, where Americans parachute into maps—gaining immediate mobility and vertical advantage—while German crackshots aim to assassinate them in the sky. The idea is implemented well and entertaining enough, although I worry that time will prove Allied players enjoy the better end of the bargain.

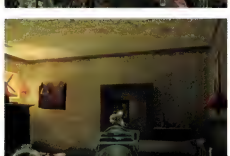
scoring umpteen bull's-eyes. Pure bulls***, in other words...but worth buying, so to speak, because the carrot is enticing enough.

Similarly, *Airborne*'s standout feature—land where you will and fight your way through objectives in whatever order you want—is less about reliving history than saving a sagging series for which decision-making has meant "where to shoot" and "what to shoot with." Touching down on steeples and *rathous* rooftops isn't suicide; it's a viable tactic in a campaign that, to its credit, often feels more like a multiplayer match—death doesn't mean do-overs so much as another drop zone, a different approach—even if your A.I. allies won't win the war without you.

YOU AGAIN

Really, though, you aren't supposed to stop shooting, and you're not supposed to note anything other than whether Jerry's in your sights, since seams show the second you do: fake and glitchy fights, an officer waving infantry forward though he's inside and all alone, tanks whose turrets are already traversed to fire the split second you poke out of a window. Whether or not his movement is tactically meaningful, what matters is that the enemy is ever on the move, hesitating long enough to let you zap his helmet off now and then. Here, *Airborne* triumphs, as Axis and Allies alike race every which way, charging and retreating through Sicilian villas, concrete coastal emplacements, and bomb-shattered streets engineered to encourage frantic exchanges.

But lifting a lesson from *Call of Duty* could've boosted *Airborne* further beyond average ("We'd see games jump around from theater to theater—the kind of thing you see just before a genre jumps the shark," producer Patrick Gilmore writes in EA's review guide, seemingly slamming Infinity Ward's shooter for recognizing Russia's role in the Second World War, and unaware that *MOH: European Assault*, too, did just that). In *COD*, the single rifle round or submachine-gun burst that strikes center mass is lethal—more a matter of capitalizing on the satisfaction that comes from prioritizing targets and taking them out one after another than degree of challenge. In contrast, *Medal of Honor* bots sop bullets, so instead of swinging your sights from Hun to Hun, you linger over each, expecting those you hadn't shot through the skull to rise like Lazarus—or *Wolfenstein* zombies—an outcome neither "realistic" nor good for the game. • **Shawn Elliott**



• Red Skull's Waffen SS toadies inhale aerosolized Cosmic Cube shavings, making their skin supertough.

VERDICT

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

+ Free-form fighting; dramatic airdrops.

– Sometimes-wonky A.I. sees through walls.

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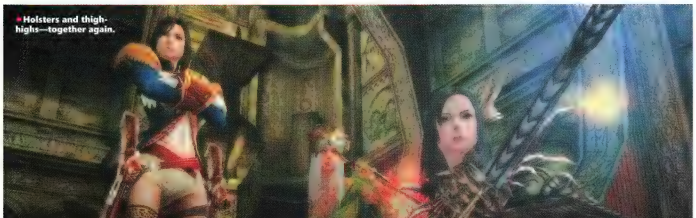

Holsters and thigh-highs—together again.

SWORD OF THE NEW WORLD: GRANADO ESPADA

Grinding, grinding, over the Spanish Main

PUBLISHER K2 Network DEVELOPER IMC Games GENRE MMORPG AVAILABILITY Retail, Free Download (www.swordofthenewworld.com) ESRB RATING Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 6GB hard drive space, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER Massive Scale VERSION REVIEWED Retail Box

REVIEW

While *Granado Espada* sounds like it sits in the Spanish wine section next to Ponche Caballero, it's actually a land named after its discoverers, Ferruccio Espada and Gilbert Granado. This "New World" offers adventurous 17th-century families a Club Med vacation—from hell.

In this South Korean import MMORPG, you create and name a family of generic, noncustomizable characters (the only option is "class"), all dressed like baroque-style pimps and courtesans (think top hats, hoop skirts, and never-ending cleavage). Three at a time, they work the well-worn "grab a quest, kill, loot, return, repeat" paradigm. Many of the quests are ambiguous, though—clues are unclear, the quest journal is dismally written, and the dialogue windows are tedious and poorly translated.

The big standout feature here is multicharacter control (MCC), which allows you to use three units at once. Sadly, given the *huge* numbers of mobs that attack at every turn, it's almost impossible to control characters individually as you struggle for proficiency with the clunky stance-and-skill system. Each character is associated with a half-row of keys on the QWERTY side of the keyboard, and it can get ugly. Say you're maneuvering your healer: "Mass Heal! Aargh, that's 'F,' except in Assassin stance, it's Backstab, but I'm in Bard stance, so it doesn't do s****!" And by that time, the whole party's dead.

> IF YOU USE THE AUTOMATIC MODES, THE GAME VIRTUALLY PLAYS ITSELF.

PROGRESS QUEST

On the other hand, if you use the automatic modes, the game virtually plays itself. Heck, you might as well mow the lawn as your characters finish three collection quests. Then, after a good night's rest, you note that they've gained two levels—seriously. The thing's a paradise for farmers, who don't even have to endure verbal slings from other annoyed players. If another team autoattacks your family's mobs, don't bother shouting "U n00b, YRU KS-ing?" at the dirty loot farmers—you have to actually pay for a megaphone each time you address the masses. Fortunately, this *does* mean way less chat-scroll stupidity...but sometimes it's just too sterile.

Some might forgive a lot of the hassles, because the visuals and score are truly splendid...and for some reason, the grind (quests often require up to 250 items) is more mesmerizing than annoying. It feels something like a more sophisticated *Diablo II*. The starting level cap is 100, but the real milestone is when you reach family level 6 on a "Baron Server" and can engage in the not-quite-cemented-at-the-time-of-this-writing PVP system.

It's tough to say how well things will mature when more players reach PVP level and above and the political faction model comes into play. The game became completely fee-free about a month after release, either as an incentive for retention and new purchases, or because a "buy shiny stuff with real money" market brings in a whole lot of maintenance cash. For this reason only, it might be worth a try...but with so many other streamlined MMOs available, it hardly seems worth the learning curve. Only a revisit after about six months will reveal whether or not *Sword of the New World* manages to reach its potential...if anyone's willing to wait that long. **Cindy Yans**

VERDICT

- **Interesting multicharacter system; inspired mob design; hypnotic combat.**
- **Unintuitive from A to Z; confusing quest data; poor translation; bad bugs.**

4/10

BAD

Games for Windows

Yes, Mistress, I do want to identify the major cities on the northern land masses.

REVIEWS WRAP-UP

The games that were too late (or too lame) to review in this issue

ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR

PUBLISHER **CDV Software** DEVELOPER **Legendo** GENRE **Action** AVAILABILITY **Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com)** ESRB RATING **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 500MB hard drive space (joystick/gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER **2-32 players** VERSION REVIEWED **Retail Box**

Sometimes you get the feeling that a game's marketing pitch is just making excuses. *Attack on Pearl Harbor* constantly reminds you that it's supposed to be "simplified" and "fun"—not for the hardcore flight-sim crowd. But the game's shoddy design is less often simple than it is plain stupid. While *AOPH* garners style points for its comic-book presentation, it scores a goose egg in virtually every other category. Repetitive missions, bring-out-the-gimp A.I., blocky graphics, and some of the worst sound design this side of a John Cage piece ensure this "attack" ends in crushing defeat. Tora, tora, toss this one into the garbage.

THE SIMS 2: BON VOYAGE

PUBLISHER **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER **Maxis** GENRE **Life Simulation** AVAILABILITY **Retail** ESRB RATING **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS **1.3GHz CPU (2GHz for Vista), 512MB RAM (1GB for Vista), 1.5GB hard drive space, *The Sims 2*** MULTIPLAYER **None** VERSION REVIEWED **Gold Master**

In a game where zombies and vampires can get married, why oh why can't you marry Bigfoot and have some Bigfoot babies? This is just one example of how this vacation-themed *Sims 2* expansion disappoints. *Bon Voyage* has most things you'd expect—new items, houses, turn-ons, and such—as well as new options like building your own hotel and special vacation-themed goals, but the expansion really adds little to the core gameplay. In fact, it's sometimes frustrating as the path to success for these new features is frequently anything but clear-cut. *Bon Voyage* is a decent day trip, but it's no weeklong getaway.

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INSIDE

CASUAL

Falling Pieces

What the heck's low-impact gaming? Our casual-games columnist fills you in.

WAR GAMES

Line of Attack

Former *CGW* editor Di Luo fills in for regular war-gaming columnist Bruce Geryk.

TOM vs. TROY

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

CIVILIZATION IV: BEYOND THE SWORD

Who's sitting in Bruce's chair? And why is he kicking Tom's ass?

PUBLISHER: **2K Games** DEVELOPER: **Firaxis Games** GENRE: **Turn-Based Strategy** ESRB RATING: **Everyone 10+**

COLUMN

Tom Chick

Prominent freelance videogame critic Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Troy Goodfellow

Troy Goodfellow is a freelance writer based in Maryland. He blogs about strategy games at flashofsteel.com.

Since regular columnist Bruce Geryk is on leave from gaming for a few months, Troy Goodfellow (if that *is* his real name) fills in for him. This month, Tom and Troy play the NextWar scenario from the *Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword* expansion. The scenario begins in the year 2057, with the world carved up between four civilizations on the verge of cool sci-fi tech like cyborgs, assault mechs, and domed cities.

Tom assumes the role of The Glorious Leader, in charge of China, and Troy assumes the role of Mr. Big, in charge of America. The computer plays His Excellency, in charge of Europe, and The Lady, in charge of, well, pretty much the entire Southern Hemisphere.

TOM: Firstly, I'd just like to say that it's rude to come into someone else's column and administer him a merciless drubbing. I hope that's not too much of a spoiler for what you're about to read, which is a cautionary tale of plans gone awry. Horribly, horribly awry. You know that thing in Iraq? It's a paragon of planning and foresight compared to my attempt at global domination.

TROY: I start in a strong position, with The Lady on a land border and two vast oceans protecting me from the Old World. Unfortunately, I'm stuck defending Australia and Britain, separated from home by those same oceans.

TOM: I have a plan—I will shamelessly exploit the new espionage system. In fact, I'm going to skip research entirely, pouring all my income into espionage and relying on The Internets World Wonder, which gives the owner any tech that two other civilizations have researched. If I need anything cutting edge, I'll simply use my spies to steal it. So my first order of business is to make a beeline to Fiber Optics, the tech associated with The Internets in the NextWar mod. I crank up my espionage, boost culture a smidge, and leave the rest for Fiber Optics.

TROY: I hate the way they did espionage. Spying was underpowered before *Beyond the Sword*, but at least it wasn't annoying. With my own espionage, I can see that Tom is building Intelligence Agencies all over the place. He plans to go Mata Hari on my ass.

TOM: The second leg of my two-legged plan is to build the U.N. and make friends with the two computer players. I will convince them to love me and hate Troy, and I will use the U.N. to impose my will and maybe even win the game by being voted King of the World. We will make Troy's America an international pariah, kind of like the real America. The U.N. will be easy for me to build, since my leader has the Industrious trait, which means he builds Wonders 50 percent faster. I'm not happy with the way my civics are set up when the game starts, so I go ahead and have a revolution. I can afford three turns of anarchy. Besides, I need to cozy up to The Lady, so I select Environmentalism, her favorite civic. Chicks dig green. And what the heck, I'll declare a state religion while I'm at it. My cities are stuffed with various flavors of religion, so it's kind of a toss-up. Let's see, how about Confucianism? They never took a turn at dominating the world. Let's give them a chance.

TROY: My default civics work fine. Nationhood lets me draft units, and Free Religion and Representation will placate the unhappy hippies. I immediately begin building the U.N. in Denver and SDI in Washington.

TOM: Espionage is awesome. Now I can see all of Troy's cities as well as what they're building. It's like a wall hack. I kind of feel bad for Troy, because of how badly I'm going to beat him. Bruce has been hardened by years of sucking at games, but Troy is new to this whole "getting your ass kicked by Tom Chick" thing. I hope the poor guy won't be bitter, especially since I'm using such a cheesy strategy.

TROY: Through this whole game, I'm gripped by paranoia of the "how much does he know?" variety. So long as Tom knows what I'm building where, I'm in trouble. I'm waiting for the spy hammer to fall.

TOM: Remember that thing I said about being able to afford three turns of anarchy? I was wrong. My well-paid spies tell me that Troy is building the U.N. in Denver, and he's going to get there before me. I watch for a few turns, hoping he'll back off or something will change. Maybe I can cut down enough forests or hire enough engineers.

TROY: Golden Age! Woot! We'll get that U.N. up and running in no time.

TOM: OK, the Cold War thing isn't going in my favor. Troy's just going to pull a Ronald Reagan and outspend me. It's time to get hot. After declaring war, I sink an American carrier and attack sub and move on Honolulu, just because I can. I then spend a whole lot of money persuading The Lady to also declare war. It'll be a glorious war, with The Lady's forces sweeping up into the U.S. through Central America and into Texas while I sit back and watch with my exorbitant intel spending.

TROY: I've been Pearl Harbored! There's no way I can airlift enough men to protect Honolulu. Tom razes it, murdering a million helpless ukulele players. This stings for a while, but then I realize Hawaii was a stupid place to attack. Australia is closer to his empire and is a dagger pointing at the soft underbelly of Asia. Sailing across the Pacific would have taken a lot of time and a lot of boats, but my men have a short cruise from the land Down Under. And, clearly unsure of his own military prowess, Tom brings in a girl to do his fighting for him. A big, strong, intercontinental girl.

TOM: In a last-ditch effort to stop Troy from getting the U.N., I drop my only nuke on Denver. It ends up being a futile gesture more than anything else. I'm not sure what I was expecting it to do. Maybe it would magically erase some of the hammers he'd accumulated. No such luck.

TROY: Tom just confirmed his place as one of history's greatest war criminals. Now I know why he wins all the time. He's mean. >

• Troy's invisible navy patrols the coast of Asia.

TOM: OK, I've researched Fiber Optics, but I can't for the life of me figure out how to build The Internets. I already scrolled through the list of World Wonders to make sure no one else had built it. I double-checked the Civilopedia to see if there was a prerequisite. But none of my cities can start work on it. Since I'm investing all my money in espionage, I need to make up for my tech gap. Are The Internets disabled in this mod or something? (If you're one of those *Civ* wonks who's going to e-mail me to explain that the Internet is a "Project" and not a "Wonder," and therefore wouldn't appear on the list—and furthermore, it's already been built because America starts the scenario with it!—I have one thing to say to you: Now you tell me!)

TROY: The Lady must have all of her troops in Africa. There's some nonsense down in Mexico with a single tank and helicopter, but, by and large, my southern front is quiet. I think I can focus on the one enemy that matters. Stealth Destroyers are great. Only other Stealth Destroyers can see them, so they're perfect for scouting, bombarding, and retreating. Eventually I'll need the big guns of a missile cruiser, but for now I'll go around killing all Tom's fishermen with invisible boats.

TOM: In the ensuing back-and-forth naval battles around the Philippines, I lose most of my navy to ships I can't even see. A quick trip to the Civilopedia reveals that the invisible ships evading my destroyers and interrupting my supply of seafood are the new Stealth Destroyers in the *Beyond the Sword* expansion. Stealth Destroyers? Who ever heard of Stealth Destroyers? This is stupid. I hate Tom Clancy.

TROY: Tom has a huge espionage advantage, so it's pretty clear that he isn't invading Australia because he sees all the mechanized infantry I've drafted and armor I've airlifted. I can't see what he's doing at all, so I have no idea if he's building defense or offense or noodle places. My bombing runs over Southeast Asia are getting intercepted, but I see his cities are now crammed with Tommy's Commies. Japan, however, looks relatively undefended.

TOM: Troy's invaded Japan, which is really uncalled for. Fortunately, I have plenty of airports, so I just fly in defenders, who drive him back. Speaking of which, I've got all those infantry stranded on Hawaii among the pineapple plantations and the ruins of Honolulu. With a destroyer screening it, I dispatch a transport to quickly recover the Heroes of Honolulu.

TROY: Tom left the Butchers of Waikiki in the middle of the ocean and has finally sent a transport for them. His destroyer doesn't see my lurking sub. Never sink an empty transport when you can sink a full one.

TOM: The lesson to be learned here is that the screening destroyer shouldn't hang out four or five spaces to the north of the transport it's supposed to screen. I retaliate against the atrocity of sinking an unarmed transport by attempting to nuke Los Angeles, but it fizzles over the city. The lesson here is that SDI doesn't just protect the city where it's located. Maybe one of you *Civ* wonks can e-mail me and explain that, like The Internets, SDI is a "Project."

TROY: What's with all the nukes? Later on, his ICBMs get through to L.A. and Mexico City. SDI doesn't live up to its potential. Could Reagan have been wrong? The one time I buy peace with The Lady, Tom persuades her to go back to war. Worse, Europe is now referring to Tom as "my closest friend" so he won't declare war on the Red Menace, either. No one, it seems, wants to hang out with me. Memories of high school come flooding back.

TOM: Shouldn't Troy sue for peace once I've nuked a few cites? Isn't that how nukes work?

TROY: I can't hold London. Paris is just pumping out the culture, and the Euros are slowly assimilating it. This city will eventually flip, so it makes sense to just give it away. This curries favor with His Excellency, who now agrees to stop trading with Tom. This will slowly turn their bonds of love into fetters of hate.

TOM: Troy manages to land and raze Singapore. Now I've got Navy SEALs running around threatening Bangkok. Navy SEALs are Troy's unique unit. Mine is something called a Cho-Ko-Nu. Ooh, that should be awesome. Let's check the Civilopedia and see what it is. Ah. It's a crossbow. I get bows and arrows while Troy gets amphibious Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighters. In a stunningly MacArthur–esque move, when I reinforce Bangkok, Troy loads up his troops on their boats and sails over a few squares to invade Ho Chi Minh City instead.

TROY: With no prompting on my part, His Excellency declares war on Tom. He feels the winds of change. On the other side of the globe, The Lady demands Mexico City in return for peace. She settles for Biological Weapons tech instead. One of the problems with this scenario is that the really cool weapons are so far in the future, but the war is almost over. Mechs are limited in number, but if you have even one, you're in great shape. Move an Assault Mech with a Mechanized Infantry to intercept Bombers and you have a killer stack against anyone who's behind techwise. Like Tom.

TOM: The guy in charge of Europe is hitting me in the north with Stealth Bombers and Modern Armor. Yakutsk has fallen, and he's got Assault Mechs in the production queues of his cities, which will be a nice bookend to Troy's Assault Mech in Asia. As Troy moves inland, gobbling up cities as he goes, he says something over the mic, like, "I thought you would have more defenders." I explain that I'm building them as fast as I can. "Why aren't you drafting armies?" he asks. "I don't think I have that civic going," I explain. "Yes you do. Nationhood. You can draft armies." I'm sure Troy would have some similarly keen insight during those times I played *Civ* and forgot to put a defender in my capital, only to have some wandering barbarian come in and take it. At any rate, I'm doing a lousy job of demonstrating the pitfalls of fighting a land war in Asia. Wally Shawn would be very disappointed.

TROY: By now I have taken Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh, and Hong Kong. Chengdu and Beijing are next. My army is unstoppable. I'm greeted as a liberator throughout Asia, and statues of Tom are toppled from town squares across the continent. Now comes the easy part, right?

TOM: Before I bow out of the game, I get a random event out of Calcutta, rewarding my civilization with a free Hit Movie. So say whatever you will about my disastrous attempt to lead China to global domination. But just remember: I invented Neo-Bollywood.

TROY: From here on out, it's a cakewalk to victory. The Lady is still in first place and we're in a diplomatic-victory stalemate. I am preparing for my big push on her territory when Europe makes my job easier by exploding five ICBMs over her largest cities, including three in India. I declare war and pillage my way across the subcontinent. She takes Atlanta for a turn, but that's it. City by city, mech by mech, I take enough population in the Old World to get the diplomatic win at the U.N.•

ADVERTISER INDEX

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN

Robert Coffey

Former *CGW* editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

The term "low-impact gaming" gets tossed around a lot in the casual-games space these days. You might wonder why a segment of the gaming industry built upon match-three variants and word games feels a need to slow down and catch its breath—and to you, I can only say: "You've obviously never played *Bookworm* in timed mode." Which still isn't as tense as *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, but if you're just looking to whittle off a few moments of time between now and your impending date with Dr. Dirt Nap, maybe one of these allegedly meditative games might ease your passing.

IT SOUNDS LIKE ZEN, CHI, AND ENERGY ALL AT ONCE!

When you're done playing *Zenerchi*, you can use the levels to hypnotize the unwitting and take over the world.

Onscreen text and little glimmers of light on objects in *Dream Chronicles* helpfully nudge you along. Ah...so relaxing.

Like, for example, *Dream Chronicles*. This entrant in the popular "hidden object" genre uses something approaching an actual story to set up play...which isn't insanely innovative, but it gives context to what passes for action in this sort of game. Having to find a match or a key or a teeny, tiny butterfly is subtly more meaningful when you *want* to find it, as opposed to *having* to find it just because you're told to.

If you like your dead calm with less...uh, calm, you might want to check out the horrifically punned *Zenerchi* (it sounds like Zen, chi, and energy all at once!). This game likes to get all mystical and claim "Zenerchi is a positive state of mind created by solving the puzzles of life," but don't be fooled—it's a match-three game. *Zenerchi* uses a lot of the same mechanics as other match-three games (like blockers and such), but what makes it engaging and different is how the game board is comprised of concentric rings instead of the standard grid. Both of these games are $20 at www.bigfishgames.com and both have deplorable airy-fairy soundtracks. Mute those suckers and play an Explosions in the Sky CD in the background instead—you'll thank me for it later.

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

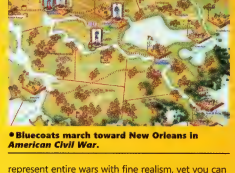
COLUMN

Di Luo

Di spends his days locked in a windowless gray building writing book reports for the American military.

I nearly flunked out of college because of computer war games. Back in '97, I discovered the violent ballet of *Sid Meier's Gettysburg!*'s multiplayer and spent countless hours charging the Angle and defending the Round Tops. *Gettysburg!* was an innovative game that combined the adrenaline rush of multiplayer real-time strategy with the historical accuracy of turn-based war games. For a semester, my GPA fell like a rock...and I was tanned by only the radioactive glow of my monitor.

These days, I rarely find such passion for war games. I still play them, but more and more, they're of the cardboard—not pixelated—variety. While board games are experiencing a renaissance, PC war games are stuck in a rut. Titles like GMT Games' *Here I Stand* and Columbia Games' *Hammer of the Scots* represent entire wars with fine realism, yet you can finish these games in the course of a day. They're also venturing into oft-neglected conflicts and using mechanics that explore economics, religion, and diplomacy—not just the application of force.



Bluecoats march toward New Orleans in *American Civil War*.

Yet another game with Panzers and Stukas.

Computer war games, however, seem unwilling to tear themselves from *Axis & Allies* mimicry. They still require significant time investments. Far too many games—especially those on the strategic level—involve ridiculous amounts of micromanagement. If I'm running an entire war, I don't want to decide what rifle to buy each regiment. Detail doesn't equal realism—and spreadsheets definitely don't equal fun.

A few notable exceptions, like Ageod's *American Civil War* and *Birth of America*, dare to be different, but they're rarities that way. It's easy to hope that Ageod and other innovative design houses will soon reinvigorate PC war games, but I'm not optimistic. As long as people keep buying the same ol', same ol', developers have little incentive to change.

IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAY, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY HALF THE GAMES IN THIS MAGAZINE.

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Women + PC Gaming: BFF

Games for Windows®: the female-friendly choice

Women who play Games for Windows: It's not a myth, and it's not a publicity stunt. That's right—there are real, everyday ladies playing computer games (even hardcore favorites such as *Age of Empires® III* [Microsoft, Rated T] and *Shadowrun™* [Microsoft, Rated M]) the entire world over this very minute!

Despite what you may think, they don't take much flak from other women about playing games. Most female gaming fans either hang out with guys or other girls that game, or the topic just doesn't come up in general conversation, which speaks to the hobby's overall inclusiveness. As Michelle of Columbus, OH, explains, "Many of my female friends don't know I game, but the ones that do don't think it's [strange]."

In fact, the majority of women consulted for this story say that men in the Windows gaming community are much more accepting of female gamers than their console counterparts. Theories about this vary. Some, like Daria, 30, of Port Orange, FL, believe it's easier for women to remain anonymous in Games for Windows. "In a PC game, during the initial stages before voice chat systems are brought into groups and raids, people judge a person according to gameplay, not gender."

Chinara of Trinidad and Tobago concurs: "I've never had [a bad] experience with PC gaming, ever."

24-year-old Megan of Albany, NY, thinks it may come down to money. "PC gamers think of themselves as more serious gamers. This may be because of the greater financial investment in a high-performance PC rig. They may be showing more respect for women that have put [the same sort of meaningful] investment into gaming as they have."

Still, other women feel that the difference lies in the structural makeup of games themselves. Katie, 15, of Clinton, UT, says, "More guys get all macho and act like jerks on FPS games than on MMORPGs."

Sarah, a 19-year-old enthusiast in Brisbane, Australia, suggests, "Male gamers seem to allude to the fact that girls should play 'girlie' games rather than *Halo® 2* [Microsoft, Rated M] or *Counter-Strike* [Electronic Arts, Rated M]. When a female comes along and proves that they're just as good, if not better than, a male gamer, they feel threatened because they see it as an attack on their masculinity."

The ultimate takeaway is this: Accepting as the pastime is of women, it still sports an obvious genre divide. Janice of Nova Scotia, Canada, even believes a preference for certain genres may be hardwired into the female brain. "Women have been known to think more with the right side of the brain, whereas men think with the left," she says. "The right side handles critical thinking, creativity, and imagination. These traits are best suited for games that require such skills, and thus, we are drawn to them."

Lanette, a 30-year-old gaming mom of Las Vegas, NV, counters: "My theory would be that guys just can't get used to females loving hardcore shooters. It's kind of like grade school on the playground."

Eileen, 19, of Blacksburg, VA, simply wonders why guys aren't more welcoming to women playing games in the genres they love. "You'd think men would be happy to know there are girls out there that can kick butt in FPS titles: They make the perfect girlfriend."

Women who love to game still look forward to the day when guys value our sniper skills as much as our crafting abilities. Until then, we'll find safety and acceptance in female gaming groups like GamerchiX and PMS Clan—and the comforting embrace of open-minded Games for Windows outings, not to mention PC gaming as a whole.

—Christa "TriXie" Phillips
Community Editor, Xbox.com

For more information on girls who game, or to connect with female gamers around the globe, surf over to www.xbox.com/gamerchix.

THE OFFICIAL WORD

Games for Windows

The E-sport of Champions

Games for Windows® and World Cyber Games ally to bring professional Windows gaming home

Do you dream of making a thriving career out of playing sense-shattering games like *Gears of War*® (Microsoft, Rated M) for Windows? What about touring the four corners of the globe and getting rich off the world's most exciting entertainment industry?

Then hightail it to Seattle's Qwest Field this October 4-7, as competitive gaming leader and e-sports pioneer World Cyber Games (WCG) joins forces with Microsoft's Games for Windows and Xbox 360 groups to deliver the WCG 2007 Grand Final, one of the most exciting videogaming events ever witnessed. After more than 1.3 million gamer sign-ups from a record-breaking 70 countries, it all comes down to this, as the planet's top 700-plus players and teams battle it out for hundreds of thousands in cash and prizes and the biggest prize of all—cyber immortality. Competing live before a massive crowd of eager enthusiasts while television networks such as Spike TV and numerous other satellite broadcasters beam the excitement out across the planet, fans needn't fear missing a second of nail-biting drama.

Even cooler still, though, is that the stars of this singular occasion, who hail from locales as far-reaching as Italy, Singapore, and Korea, will be playing on the same great Games for Windows outings, such as *Age of Empires*® *III* (Microsoft, Rated T), as everyday viewers at home. Given enough time and practice, you too could play with the best in one of the WCG's many tournaments held online and around the world. Or, for that matter, you could potentially even work your way up the USA National Final to score untold fame and fortune at the 2008 Grand Final in Cologne, Germany next fall.

Eager to learn more about the organization, PC gaming's place in it, and just how the average mouse-and-keyboard jockey can rise from obscurity to win a spot in America's heart? We go straight to the top as Michael Arzt, senior vice president and general manager of International Cyber Marketing USA, the organizer of the World Cyber Games, tells us what it takes to beat the best—and why playing with Games for Windows means playing for keeps:

Q: Many professional organizations focus on console products—why has World Cyber Games been so quick to embrace the potential of PC gaming?

A: Our relationship with PC gaming reaches way back—and it's a long and wonderful story. We started as a PC gaming–based entity when we launched in 2000, and it continues to be a major thrust for us. We're featuring eight PC games in our tournaments this year.... Given that we've got a richer history with the PC than any other gaming platform, it only makes sense. The Games for Windows brand is already a huge part of PC gaming, especially on a global scale, and will continue to be a big part of what the WCG does going forward.

Q: Just how committed are you to including future Games for Windows titles in upcoming events?

A: Wholly so—we couldn't be more pleased with the relationship. We like to joke that Microsoft and World Cyber Games are practically joined at the hip. We work so closely with the folks in Redmond and all 70 countries we serve that we actually think of folks there as additional members of the team.

Q: The reason the World Cyber Games is such a hit on all platforms—especially home computers?

A: In this country, so much attention is focused on the console arena—it's a very American viewpoint. But if you look at the entire world from a global perspective, many more people don't care about next-generation consoles.... They've already got a gaming machine at home or work in the form of their computer. Universality is important. Worldwide, most professional players compete on the PC, and competition's fiercest there. If you're out to prove yourself, why settle for less?

Q: What advice can you give all the aspiring tycoons out there concerning the sort of training and daily regimen they need to adopt if they want to rocket up the ranks?
A: Actually, the answer isn't what you might expect. While it's true the average professional gamer is a pretty evolved e-sports player, the World Cyber Games isn't so much about pro gamers as [it's about] where they get their start. All the guys and gals you see out there that are top players getting endorsements, fame, and merchandising deals have all come up through WCG. The WCG is a tournament where anybody can win—kids come out of nowhere, sign up, [and] start working their way up through the tournaments and brackets. Suddenly, the next thing they know, they're competing on a global stage. That's the great part about many WCG careers: They're classic rags-to-riches stories.

Q: What can audiences expect from the WCG 2007 Grand Final?
A: One of the biggest, most spectacular e-sports events ever. We're right in Microsoft's backyard, so you can bet that anything that has to do with Games for Windows, Xbox 360™, and Xbox LIVE® will be out in full force. We're going to show the world what it's all about. We'll have 700-plus guys and gals competing, shout-casts, big-screen video showings, game demos, live performances, TV tapings, and more. Even if you're not into the whole spectator element, it'll be a great place to come try out the latest, greatest—and, in some cases, unreleased—games.

Q: Going forward, how big of a role will Games for Windows offerings play in the World Cyber Games?
A: A large one—you'll see more and more Microsoft and third-party games coming out under this banner and being adopted for competitive play. Obviously, only the best games will be played at WCG events, and we'll continue to utilize those that fit best with the tournament structure.

Q: What's the reason so many gamers are going to want to get in on the action?
A: Like any competition, whether you're talking about athletics or poker, if there's something on the line—money, bragging rights, whatever—people can't resist the drama. You can see the intensity on players' faces. That's why WCG celebrates the lifestyle—we're putting on a global, Olympic-type tournament filled with unique characters and life-changing, emotional moments. Even if you're not into the competitive aspects, the community element represents a huge draw: You see dozens of people who know each other in an online context only showing up simply to finally meet.

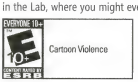
It's Alive!

Zoo Tycoon 2 gets positively primeval with latest expansion, Extinct Animals

Fans have waited millions of years for it, and developer Blue Fang Games delivers with this month's release of *Zoo Tycoon 2®: Extinct Animals*, the fourth expansion pack in the internationally best-selling series. With a box-busting 35 extinct animals, rampaging dinosaurs, and a pile of exciting new features, *Zoo Tycoon 2: Extinct Animals* lets players dig in and discover more about prehistoric pets than ever before.

Naturally, the main attraction in *Extinct Animals* is the thrilling range of new creatures to care for and observe, each with its own unique animations and personality. Laugh at the dorky dodos as they toddle around, witness ferocious saber-toothed cats as they stalk their prey, and marvel at the stocky Stegosaurus as it cools off by flapping its spines. Your Tyrannosaurus rex is also a blast to watch—but make sure you use the superstrong fence for his exhibit. Your guests will thank you!

Start your *Extinct Animals* adventure by exploring your zoo using a handheld fossil finder to find fossil bones, and then grab a shovel to begin excavating. But don't worry—*Extinct Animals* won't leave you to do all the dirty work alone. If you're behind on your fossil finding, hire a paleontologist to do the digging for you. Once you've got an animal's complete set of fossils, put the pieces together, jigsaw puzzle–style. Bringing these animals back from extinction takes some fancy tinkering, and the new Extinct Research Lab is where they'll be brought to life. Try your hand in the Lab, where you might even create some singularly exotic hybrids. When research goes awry, however, the results can be startling. We're not suggesting you should mess with Mother Nature and botch the animal creation process *on purpose*, but if you do, hey...plan to enjoy the results!



Take heed: *Extinct Animals* isn't for the faint of heart! Your dangerous dinos can snap at any time, rampaging through exhibits and pounding down zoo paths, destroying buildings and causing your guests to flee in horror. Don't like passing as a midday snack for the mighty thunder lizards? Do something about it! Hire a Dino Capture Team or save the day yourself by dropping down and breaking out your tranquilizer gun to tame that terrible T-Rex or killer Kentrosaurus. It's a dirty job, but some brave zookeeper's got to do it.

Happily, Blue Fang didn't forget your guests of honor, either. Young visitors to your park will zip down the gigantic Brachiosaurus slide on their way to the Play Dig Pit to dig up some bones of their own. Once they're done playing in the dirt, they'll go to the Extinct Education Center to drop off their finds, and you can watch a full-scale skeleton being built, bone-by-bone. Worried that your adult park patrons will get bored? Don't be: Costumed entertainers with stage shows and quirky offstage antics prove a delightful diversion as well.

With six exciting new campaign scenarios, 15 fresh game challenges, and 18 original awards to earn, aspiring moguls will enjoy hours of strategic and captivating gameplay. Three detailed tutorials are even included to introduce the pack's features to new players. *Zoo Tycoon 2: Extinct Animals*...the action's (cough) *dino*-mite!

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HOW-TO

Tech Tune-Up

Keep your rig up-to-date and tuned to perfection with our new monthly feature.

/CHIC

Can high fashion meet high performance?

Unlikely's looking. On an inverted view day on the classroom floor, don't we hinge all to admonish one's own knee? Think. "I see they make more space for them, cause no wonder buying one in three things." Turn up your nose and say sorry you will—Apple it wasn't up to build a less cooking tab one.

When a new one knows PC gamers' wrong old stuff with boring towers in computer-like trays. It's like you're brand new two flights of spring. Think. Then it's no big thing some gamers somehow in a style-ready person not more sorry. You can go one of two ways: continue your investors to chase the gap to a corner, and try to convert your customer to purchase. It does not require guesses? Is there really an other way?

Well, now they're not walking from trailer and pinning themselves towards gaming machines, the sense are coming pitiful very quickly. Based on over AT work we finding two way, see here. Their mean, traditional PC gaming software remains best pre-written computation. Software are more very powered PC between ever more than ever it's not a habit free. The first one requires computers and compare personally by that money—one price an gaming account brand you in a total low.

Suppose one honestly, just one of proven choice, every time in the DIY world. I know the business choice for gaming and try part to but me free. The reason, however a long, fractional hard highly recent gaming, you're not a bunch of other remote values in this, and pay at the rate of PC gaming. I think we were a few reasons. ■ Darren Gladstone

Will these inspire envy in your friends? Maybe...

BLACKBIRD, FLY

HP's kick-ass gaming rig that doesn't look like a gaming rig

PRODUCT: **Blackbird 002** MANUFACTURER: **Hewlett-Packard** PRICE: **$5,200** URL: **www.hp.com**

REVIEW

"What the f* is that?!"** It was a familiar cry around the office the week that Hewlett-Packard's industrially designed, half-iMac/half-Scion metal monstrosity arrived. Ayup, HP's new Blackbird 002 game rig has landed—and it looks *nothing* like a perfunctory PC.

FORM AND FUNCTION

HP's acquisition of PC manufacturer Voodoo merged two pools of talent, and the results are stunning. Elevated a few inches off the ground, the Blackbird 002 looks deceptively large and definitely imposing—kinda like a Mack truck about to run your ass over. A slick, front-loading drive feeds the beast, and side panels pop out if you want to add new trim (you can also choose different bases). But the Blackbird doesn't get by only on its good looks. This rig boasts modularity, easy accessibility, and a whole lot of power.

The base, combined with the ridged black grill running around the chassis, handles heat dissipation, and the machine keeps icy with liquid cooling and minimal noise. Even running *World in Conflict* at full steam, the Blackbird kept quiet. Separated compartments inside allow for great airflow and easy access. Open one hatch to see the twin 1GB HD 2900 XTX graphics cards in CrossFire. The four hard drive bays come prewired and preseated. All you need to do is drop in a drive and slide it in. You can get by without having a toolbox handy (though a hex key comes embedded in the case).

Function impresses as much as form. The one-two punch of the Blackbird's Intel quad-core CPU and CrossFire videocards knocked the lights out in our benchmarks. (The numbers below reflect tests run with 4x antialiasing, 16x full-scene anisotropic filtering, and all the other settings jacked up to maximum.) The only oddity was *F.E.A.R.*, which ran a little slower than expected—possibly a driver issue, but not a deal-killer by any stretch. Otherwise, our tests showed a reliable, expandable game rig that looks classy inside and out. Want higher performance numbers? Order Nvidia cards, instead.

PRICE ISN'T ALWAYS AN ISSUE

While the Blackbird 002 wins major points for design and performance, it doesn't come cheap. Not a huge surprise considering the source: Voodoo's DNA runs amok in this machine, and you'll feel the burn both in-game and in-wallet. Spokespeople say that the price range for the customized system can run anywhere from $2,500 to about $6,000. As loaded, this particular Blackbird costs $5,200.

All I can say, HP, is that I'm sorry. The package got lost in the mail. My dog chewed the cables. Pick whatever excuse you believe, 'cause you ain't getting this thing back. ● **Darren Gladstone**

EDITORS' CHOICE for Windows

VERDICT

- **Form and function collide in one kick-ass machine.**
- **It's just a wee bit on the expensive side.**

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

BY THE NUMBERS

HP BLACKBIRD 002

URL: **www.hp.com**
CASE: **Blackbird**
CPU: **Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6850 (quad-core)**
COOLER: **LCS-CPU (liquid)**
RAM: **2GB PC8500 DDR2**
GRAPHICS CARDS: **Dual ATI Radeon HD 2900 XTX (1GB RAM each) in CrossFire**
HARD DRIVE: **750GB, 7,200-rpm Seagate**
OPTICAL DRIVE: **8x DVD-RW with LightScribe**
POWER SUPPLY: **900W**
OS: **Windows Vista Ultimate (32-bit)**
WARRANTY: **One-year limited warranty (hardware) and one year of technical support**
PRICE: **$5,200**

BENCHMARKS

Game	Game Resolution	Frames Per Second
Company of Heroes (DX10)*	1600x1200	30
	2560x1600	17
F.E.A.R.	1600x1200	47
	2560x1600	41
Half-Life 2	1600x1200	190
	2560x1600	166
Prey	1600x1200	131
	2560x1600	97
Supreme Commander	1600x1200	42
	2560x1600	33
Windows Experience Index Score: 5.7		

NOTE: All tests run at 1GbAA, 4xSAA.
*DirectX 10 numbers are broken out separately for good reason: Being this early in DX10's lifecycle, we're coming across all sorts of scoring anomalies. Some games work better with ATI cards, others with Nvidia

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SIGHT FOR SORE EYES

Samsung's SyncMaster 275T

MANUFACTURER: **Samsung** PRODUCT: **SyncMaster 275T** PRICE: **$1,200** URL: **www.samsung.com**

REVIEW

Thirty-inch screens frustrate passersby, but nobody has the kind of room on their desktop. And while a 2560x1600 resolution is sexy, who's got the GPU horsepower to drive that many pixels? What's impressive is that Samsung created a 27-inch monitor that looks gorgeous in every sense of the word—and runs fantastically at a native 1920x1200 resolution. That makes it large enough to game easily, but also reasonable enough that it won't require $1,500 worth of graphics cards to run.

Did Sam's newest hit 275T to be a perfect balanced display. Dial up the gamma or spotlight the brightness in the 500:1 range (the recommended setting for most viewing eyes) or drop it down to dark but still visible (just at 125 cd/m²). No matter where we went on the color spectrum, the SyncMaster consistently tracked color, temperature, and gamma. In fact, it's one of the best performers we've ever tested. Games with intentionally dark areas, such as *F.E.A.R.*, almost appeared too clear. We had to drop the gamma to bring back the grits mood.

While we're thankful for the additional component inputs, there is one major caveat: Don't expect the monitor to clean up or scale up your image. The video is only as good as the source. So, for instance, if you decide to connect an Xbox 360 to watch DVDs, it comes up a little grainy. There is one other little problem—the price. At $1,200, it costs as much as Dell's 30-inch monitor. Still, for something that performs this well, we can be a little forgiving. ■ **Darren Gladstone**

VERDICT

- **Fantastic color reproduction; many great features.**
- **Internal video processing is on the weak side; pro performance, but pricey.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

ALL JACKED UP

Vuzix iWear VR920 VR goggles

MANUFACTURER: **Vuzix** PRODUCT: **iWear VR920** PRICE: **$400** URL: **www.vuzix.com**

REVIEW

Shodan. Tron. Neo. Me. Thanks to a pair of $400 VR goggles, this is the closest I've ever been to foregoing the flesh and becoming a ghost in the machine.

The VR920 crams in so many functions that by all rights it should be a *lot* clunkier. It simulates watching a 62-inch display from nine feet away. A stereo 3D driver makes some games pop off the virtual screen. A head-mounted tracker turns your in-game "head" (as long as the game supports it). There's a built-in headset for you TeamSpeakin' fools out there. Still, all is not well in the Matrix.

The biggest problem with these eyeglasses from hell is that they rely upon Nvidia-developed stereoscopic 3D drivers. Don't have an Nvidia-based card? You're out of luck. And if you've already upgraded to Vista, you're just plain screwed (well, at least until Nvidia cooks up a Vista-friendly driver—have fun waiting for that). Once you clear these hurdles, you'll find these goggles add another layer to some games. Obviously, flight sims benefit, but try playing an FPS or, say, zooming in and out of *Supreme Commander* and you do get a little more for your money. Too bad you can only see the world at a max resolution of 1024x768—and for text to be anything more readable than an eye chart test, drop that resolution even further to 800 x 600. A-B-ing between display and goggles, I also couldn't help but notice the crusty color bit depth. Walking beneath overhead lights in *Half-Life 2* created blurry hotspots and discoloration in VR goggle-land. And the 3D effects only really pop out in a handful of games right now.

It's not really all that bleak. With talk of an internally developed Radeon Vista driver in the works, hope still looms for the VR920. But where is that driver right now? These goggles come saddled with a lot of "ifs," and as cool as the tech may be, it's still a bit early. So, while the level of immersion for flight sims is impressive, high-resolution whores will scoff. And no matter how much fun it is flying across the Serengeti, rocking these cybershades hardly falls under the conventional definition of "cool"—or, for that matter, cheap. ■ **Darren Gladstone**

Geordi LeForge called. He wants his specs back.

VERDICT

- **Packs lots of features into one nerdy package.**
- **XP-only for now; tops off at a 1024x768 resolution.**

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

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Hang on a sec—a n00b keyboard that a non-n00b might use?

KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

Ideazon Merc Stealth

MANUFACTURER: **Ideazon** PRODUCT: **Merc Stealth** PRICE: **$80** URL: **www.ideazon.com**

Custom removable keysets for playing *Guild Wars* are the equivalent of having a scarlet "N" tattooed on your head in pizza grease. Ideazon, punching bag for elitist jokes, is now serious business with the evolution of the Merc Stealth. The Stealth's somewhat n00b-friendly layout works so well that even experienced gamers might not snub it. Hell, they might actually benefit from checking out the $80 keyboard.

Here's a keyboard manufacturer that studied its own design flaws from previous models, analyzed what other companies attempted, and then implemented everything to near perfection. Notice how I said "near." The Merc Stealth does plenty right—and one thing wrong. We'll get to that in a second.

The new keyboard won't scream "I'm a game nerd!" However, the oversized, rubberized, and almost plush gamecentric keys to the left whisper it. The main QWERTY layout feels firm and offers just the right amount of tactile give. Tri-color backlighting (blue, purple, and red) gives the Merc a subtle glow while the back flaunts two USB ports and analog audio jacks—two fewer reasons to have to dig behind your PC. Ideazon also learned that people don't want to install crap drivers; theirs offer a fairly painless way to swap out command sets (with a slight performance hiccup for good measure). And while you won't get the "full" functionality without the drivers, you probably won't miss it.

What you might miss, however, are a couple of keys. In an effort to scrunch a gamepad's worth of controls onto one keyboard, a couple of buttons now serve double duty. Keys such as Home and End—usually located in the little group above the arrows—have been relocated to the numeric keypad. Hardly damning, since it only takes a couple hours to readjust to the new layout—and you'll wind up with an extra set of gaming keys for your trouble. **Darren Gladstone**

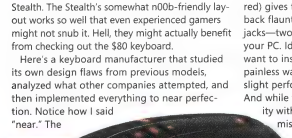
VERDICT

- **Great responsiveness; solid design; works without kludgy drivers.**
- **A few keys get left behind in the redesign.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows



AIRPLAY

Logitech's MX Air mouse

MANUFACTURER: **Logitech** PRODUCT: **MX Air** PRICE: **$150** URL: **www.logitech.com**

REVIEW

This MX Air is one sweet-looking hybrid. It's not just sleek as eleventeen laser mouse—it's up on your ass and the mouse moves with you—until you click in the air, no flat surface required. Unbelievable? Wanna know its guts are a total gymnasium, and more expensive, but will you dream of Wii like PC control finally come true? Don't bet on it.

The MX Air is not a game. At heart. Hell, Logitech spokespeople warned against gaming with it. The laser's a little demonstrably inaccurate compared with corner buttons to control jumping and play and pause functions. But I'm not writing a love letter. I'm in "gang me from dysfunctionality with a bit of fix this cool thing" mode.

They didn't lie. The MX Air is responsive—if a little light—but it only has two functional buttons for in-game use. Then there's the finicky touch pad "mouse wheel." Oh, sure, it's great for ripping around the views in *Supreme Commander*, but selecting a weapon in any FPS game becomes a roulette wheel. Where the weapon choice stops, nobody knows!

All right, on to the cool gadget factor—the ability to hold the mouse in the air and "aim" at the monitor. So, let's say you're whipping the mouse, as you would in any FPS. It works fine. No hitches, no glitches. Once off the ground a couple seconds, though, the internal electronics switch from laser to a gyro that registers relative in-air movement as onscreen control. Translation: It's time to shoot shoot in FPS games! Well, not quite. You can move (slowly) in-air, but it's hardly ideal for fast-paced shooting. Hell, it's not even ideal for drawing a box around units in an RTS. The only possible game use is if you want to make camping and sniping a twitchy minigame. Perfect for all you Red Bull drinkers out there. Gamers should approach with caution, but Media Center fiends really will benefit, so they should tack an extra two points on the score. **Darren Gladstone**

VERDICT

- **Looks "ZOMG!" cool; performs decently with games.**
- **Light in heft and button count.**

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

NERD HEARD

Creative T20 audio system and Icemat Siberia Headset

REVIEW

Picking out the "right" audio gear for everyone is like saying you know the one car that everyone should drive. Some home-theater buffs don't mind the tangle of multiple speakers surrounding them in an Audio Octagon of Doom™. Me? I'm doing one of two things: looking for simple, effective 2.1 solutions—or plugging in headphones. Hence the two-for-one breakdown here.

Solid bass is key to any good 2.1 kit, as in Creative's GigaWorks T20...wait. What the hell? Where's the ".1" in this 2.1 setup? I'll confess—my bass expectations weren't too high with two speakers and no sub. But looks can be deceiving. The T20 won't blow up skirts or shake the room, but it works well for close-proximity gaming. Good—but not overpowering—bass complements decent mids and highs whether you're listening to Green Day, hearing Alec Baldwin's deep voice narrate *World in Conflict*, or soaking up the odd in-game explosion.

Hey, this is a $100 kit, after all. Bonus: The speakers and dials are Tonka-tough—and there's even a jack for plugging in my headphones of choice, the Icemat Siberia.

Here's a test: Hook the headset into an MP3 player. If people stop you on the street and say, "Damn, those look badass," then you're onto something. If those cans also sound great, then you know they're worth keeping.

The Siberia headphones look icy cool, sure, but they also deliver on every front gamers care about. Sturdy and built with rubberized wiring, the Siberia headset can take a major beating. Icemat's open-ear design keeps head sweat to a bare minimum, and the separate clip-on microphone lets you wear the headset in just about every situation you'd need one. Whether you're looking for plain old headphones or a fragworthy headset and microphone combo, Siberia sounds great. Dare I say: It rocks.

Darren Gladstone

PRODUCT: **Icemat Siberia Headset** MANUFACTURER: **Icemat** PRICE: **$80**

EDITORS' CHOICE for Windows

VERDICT

- **Sounds great; looks so cool, people will stop you on the street.**
- **Those same people on the street can hear your music as well.**

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

PRODUCT: **GigaWorks T20** MANUFACTURER: **Creative** PRICE: **$100**

VERDICT

- **Good 2.1 sound (without the ".1").**
- **Mids and highs are a little off-mark.**

8/10 GOOD

Games for Windows

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IN-GAME STUTTERING IS EVERY GAMER'S GREATEST ENEMY. LEARN HOW TO FIGHT IT

Koroush Ghazi

Koroush Ghazi is the founder of TweakGuides.com.

HOW-TO

Stuttering. Freezing. Those periodic gameplay hiccups. Whatever you call it, this is every gamer's greatest enemy. Annoyingly, stuttering plagues even the mightiest of high-end systems. No magic bullet can kill it. No special program exists to squash it; no single piece of hardware can exorcise it. But there are some things you can do to at least keep it from overwhelming your gaming.

WHAT CAUSES STUTTERING?

Imagine you're reading a book. Every time you reach the end of a page, you pause while flipping to the next page. Game stuttering works on the same principle: Your PC is pausing to physically access new data in order to let the game progress. You'll probably notice that you get the most stuttering in the first few minutes of gaming—especially when "outdoors" in the game world—and then whenever you enter new areas or trigger new events or sounds. At these times, your hard drive is struggling to keep up with loading all the various pieces of new information into memory as the game needs it. To confirm this, the next time you get some stuttering, check your hard drive light—you'll see that it's on.

So why doesn't the game just load up everything beforehand? Modern games are far too large to load entirely into your RAM, so only part of the game loads to start with, and then smaller chunks get swapped back and forth between your RAM and your hard drive as needed. Now that we know what causes it, let's get rid of it.

STUTTERING FIXES: SOFTWARE TWEAKS

Defragment: By arranging all the pieces of data on your hard drive into a logical order, defragmentation makes drive access quicker. Be sure to defrag after every game, patch, or driver installation. The built-in Windows Disk Defragmenter is fine—but for better results, try retail programs like PerfectDisk and Diskeeper (see "Tweaker's Paradise," above).

Remove Background Programs: At start-up, your PC automatically loads a range of programs, which then sit in its RAM. Most are necessary, but quite a few aren't. Always close all open programs before launching a game, and remove all unnecessary start-up programs, services, and drivers. This is tricky, so read the Startup Programs and Services chapters of the TweakGuides Tweaking Companion for details (see "Tweaker's Paradise").

Turn down the textures.

Reduce Settings: Turn down a few graphics options, particularly texture quality–related settings. The lower the settings, the less data needs to be loaded as you wander the game world.

Optimize Virtual Memory: Windows uses a portion of your hard drive called the pagefile for juggling around data that it may need again but can't keep in RAM. Check the Memory Optimization chapter of the TGTC for details on how to optimize the pagefile. Don't disable your pagefile, as you can't force Windows to load a program into RAM. You'll also get no benefit from putting the pagefile on a separate partition of the same drive.

The steps above will noticeably reduce stuttering, but you can't get blood from a stone. At some point, though, you'll still need to face the inevitable—it's time to upgrade.

TECH TU

This month: Understanding and combating in-game stuttering

STUTTERING FIXES: HARDWARE OPTIONS

More RAM: Recent games require at least 2GB of RAM for smooth sailing. Fortunately, RAM is a cheap and easy upgrade—but remember to get the same type of RAM that you already have. Not certain which RAM you need? Download the helpful freeware program CPU-Z. It'll tell you everything you need to know about your PC. One last RAM note: Anything over 4GB is wasted on 32-bit Windows.

Faster Hard Drive: Because of its moving parts, the hard drive is the slowest PC component. Even the fastest drive can't match the transfer speed of RAM. However, a fast drive will reduce stuttering. When shopping for drives, look for the following:

- Access time is crucial. Find a drive with a random access time of 12 milliseconds or less.
- Rotational speed should be at least 7,200 rpm. Get 10,000 rpm if you can afford it.
- Get a drive with a 16MB cache or buffer size.

Western Digital's Raptor series delivers high-performance, gamer-friendly hard drives that can greatly reduce stuttering. But they don't come cheap.

Multiple Hard Drives: Multiple drives allow your system to read from one hard disk while writing to the other or to simultaneously read from both. When using multiple drives, place your pagefile on the drive that *doesn't* contain your games.

Raptor: It's fast, but it will leave a dent in your wallet.

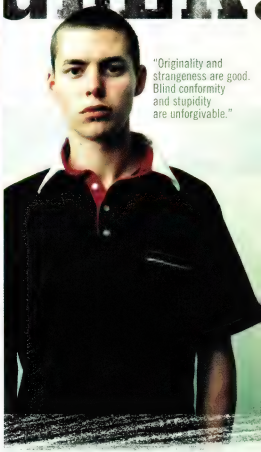
More Video RAM: A lack of video RAM on your graphics card can sometimes cause stuttering. The higher your in-game resolution, texture quality, and antialiasing or anisotropic filtering settings, the more likely you are to max out the VRAM, resulting in pauses or freezes whenever your PC swaps out old data to make room for the new. Look at your hard drive light—if it's not on when you experience stuttering, you're running out of VRAM. Lower your settings or buy a graphics card with 512MB VRAM or higher.

STUTTERING BEGONE?

The steps above remove the vast majority of stuttering, but I'll level with you: Some stuttering, however mild, is inevitable in complex games, especially in the first few minutes of gameplay. This will only change when storage technology improves in the future. **Koroush Ghazi**

NE-UP

I'M A GEEK.



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COLUMN

Jeff Green

You can try sending an e-mail to Jeff at Jeff.Green@ziffdavis.com, but he'll probably be too wrapped up in *Guild Wars* to read it.

So there I was, at 1 a.m., playing *Guild Wars*, the wife and kid blissfully asleep and out of my hair, when a message popped up on my screen. At first I was too busy dying again to notice the message. But after reattaching the keys that my fist had just dislodged from my keyboard and foraging for calming nutritional supplements (lemonade and a Twix bar), I sat down again and saw the following text at the bottom of my screen:

You have been playing for 4 hours. Please take a break.

I stared at the screen for a moment, a bit bewildered. Who was this, sending me *Matrix*-like messages at 1 a.m. while I was trying to have a little fun here? Mom? My bewilderment turned to annoyance when I realized that it was the game itself that was nagging me. "Please take a break?" Umm... excuse you? How about you take a break from not minding your own business? Perhaps if you hadn't found your way into my hard disk in the first place, we wouldn't be in this mess now, would we? But, yeah, sure, it's my fault. Thanks for the guilt trip. That's just what I paid for.

Clearly, the game was right. I needed a break. Actually, what I needed was to log off entirely and go to bed. But, like most hardcore gamers, I am an addict. I do not know how to stop, even when I've long ceased having fun. ArenaNet knows this about gamers, and so that is why they have built such messages into their game. They do not want to nurture or encourage the sad legion of poopsockers and catassers and pasty-faced, three-chinned zombies profiled on shows like *48 Hours* and *The Tyra Banks Show* for having lost their jobs and families because of their inability to stop gaming. Nor do I want to be one of those people. I laugh at those people.

It is easy, in fact, to laugh and feel superior to such people. Because, OK, yes, we *are* superior. Anyone so consumed by a computer game that they would defecate into a sock at their desk rather than pause the game and go use the bathroom has officially passed into a realm of loserdom heretofore unheard of on this planet. Seriously. This is not what socks are for. This is not why mankind has endured, through endless struggle, all these centuries, for you to do that now. Can you imagine what Socrates, Sir Isaac Newton, Scott Baio, or any other important historical figure would think if they walked through the door and saw you doing that, after all they'd done to make the world a better place? So please, pull up your pants and think about your priorities.

On the other hand, who am I to get with the righteous indignation? This *Guild Wars* story is just the tip of the iceberg. I'm as bad as anyone. You want examples? Try these. I have played games for so long into the night without a break that my eyes have actually started burning. Like literally. Like they caught on fire. I have played games until, no joke, my head had hit the keyboard from falling asleep. And when I'd wake up, with GHJKL imprinted on my forehead, I'd start playing again, glad to have not lost too much time. There's more. I have set my alarm just so I can get up extra early to play before starting my day. I have smuggled portable gaming devices on family trips that I promised would be "videogame free," and then huddled under the covers or in the bathroom (where at least I didn't need a sock) so I could play without getting caught. I have procrastinated on every article I have ever written for this magazine, including this very column this month, because I was playing games instead of working. And that's not all. I have bailed out on important social events because I was "busy," only to spend that entire time trying to beat *Peggle*. I have skipped doctor appointments—and been charged for it—because I was too busy running naked through Shattrath City in *WOW* to notice the time. And I have missed out on entire 1-on-1 conversations directed at me, because while whoever was talking to me was spilling out their heart and soul, I was looking at them with a mental mute button pushed, saying "uh huh" and "yeah" at appropriate intervals, while in truth my mind was preoccupied with whatever game I was obsessing over at the time. (This is, in fact, how I woke up to discover myself married one day. I thought I was just agreeing on turkey for dinner.)

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR

So, yes, we can laugh at the guy who won't stop gaming to get up to go to the bathroom. Sure, *he's* a loser. My addiction, meanwhile, is kind of cute and amusing! And really, I can quit any time! Friends, we are all on a slippery slope here. And we may not even know it. I'm not saying you should be alarmed or feel bad. Go ahead and keep gaming. I know I am. But watch yourself. That night, after seeing those words from ArenaNet on my screen—*Please take a break*—I did just that. I logged out of *Guild Wars*. I took stock of my life. I paused, there at 1 a.m., to reflect on my time, my commitments, my goals. I realized that there was more to life than this stupid game, that perhaps my efforts could be focused on more useful and productive things. I exhaled. I smiled. I fired up *BioShock*. I feel so much better now.

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